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TRUE WOMEN.

A Love Story.

BY

KATHARINE STUART.

"Not free from faults, nor yet too vain to mend."
POPE—*Essay on Criticism.*

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. II.

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TRUE WOMEN.

CHAPTER I.

GRACE LORAINE.

"To make a wash, would hardly stew a child."
POPE (*Characters of Women*).

GRACE LORAINE'S characteristics of cunning and selfish vanity were shown more clearly than ever in the last few weeks preceding her marriage, when all gave way to the departing bride-elect as to a fellow-creature with special claims to the consideration and sympathy of all who came in contact with her.

Mrs. Burleigh incautiously asked the over-indulged beauty to tell her what wedding-gift she would like from Madge and herself? Expressing a kindly wish that it might be one to be in daily use in Grace's new home.

The gift, of course, was offered far more as a proof of loving courtesy to Mrs. Loraine than of love for her semi-sulky daughter. There had never been any pretence of affection or even friendship between Madge and Grace Loraine. Sibyl's affection for Miss Burleigh was as distinct and unshared as Grace's for Miss Tweedy.

We may imagine, therefore, with what dismay, and almost disgust, Mrs. Burleigh received a note from the bride-elect, a few days after her little speech about the wedding-gift, in which the young lady stated she had such strict notions as to what a clergyman's wife should and should not possess and wear, that

she had chosen Mrs. Burleigh's kind present for herself, and inclosed the bill with her best thanks.

The bill was from a renowned lace merchant, and set forth in business-like terms the dainty and exquisite fineness of the black Chantilly shawl and flounces Grace Loraine had added to her trousseau with such adroit cunning and such intense satisfaction.

The bill was made out to Mrs. Burleigh of Pendrills, and the total was as distinct as startling—seventy pounds.

Mrs. Burleigh was not usually wanting in moral courage; but the impossibility of resisting this wrong-doing without causing Mrs. Loraine poignant distress placed her in a dilemma, the like of which she felt she had never been called upon to find her way out of.

A few days delay to think over the matter made action still more difficult and repugnant

to her. Finally she decided to bear the loss sooner than grieve her friend. And for the same reason she found she must also appear among Grace's wedding guests, though Madge refused decidedly the flattering invitation to be among the bridesmaids of the grasping possessor of the black lace shawl and flounces.

"If we had been true to ourselves in this matter, Madge, and not yielded to the conventional hypocrisy of offering a gift where we could offer no love with it, this would not have happened. I look upon this bill as a fitting punishment for my cowardly insincerity," moralised Mrs. Burleigh, as she proceeded to fill up a cheque and despatch it to Blackmore & Co.

"It is to Mrs. Loraine your gift is given, darling mammy, and a great deal more than seventy pounds worth of love is in your heart for her still! Let us bury Grace and her black lace as far from our minds as pos-

sible. Grace is odious to the last, mother. Fancy her new selfishness! She has doomed those pale, flaxen-eyelashed cousins of hers, the doughy-looking De Veres, to pale maize-coloured dresses, and they are in despair. Sibyl, who, you know, would wear a grey domino and a mask for life with pleasure, to let other beauties shine, has begged in vain for blue or pink or *Eau de Nile;* Grace is sweetly obstinate as usual. I declare, I am quite sorry for Mr. Elliott. He cannot know what Grace is, or he could not promise to love her."

But in spite of Madge's indignation, and the flaxen-haired cousins' despair, the maize-coloured dresses and the wedding-day arrived, and all Rippleford was astir with a curiosity and enthusiasm which it was difficult to keep within bounds, for the wedding at The Beeches was the first of any note in Rippleford for many years past.

The road from Mrs. Loraine's to the church was crowded, so was the church itself, with eager spectators. But in all the crowd there was no deeper or better feeling moving than eager curiosity.

The bridegroom was a stranger. The bride, though born and bred in Rippleford, was almost a stranger too, for she had never made one friend among the cottagers, and had been as indifferent to their interests or sorrows as they now were to her fate.

The sightseers went to be amused and to criticise; and if for a few moments the sight of Mrs. Loraine and her beloved Sibyl warmed the hearts of their neighbours, and brought a few smiles and tears of sympathy to greet their appearance, the prevailing spirit remained the same.

In a rural population alone is it possible to find so intense a curiosity combined with utter indifference to the objects to be seen.

Akin to it is the marvellous attraction that cattle find in the beating of carpets. They will leave the sunniest pasture uncropped, their oil-cakes, too, ungrudgingly, to gaze, as if fascinated, at a carpet being beaten. We cannot believe in a more perfect case of curiosity devoid of interest.

"There's a sight o' fine clothes wasted on them there bean-poles as follows miss," the godfather of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-nego remarked to some gossips near him.

Farmer Loam was, as it were, the father of the parish; his great age—for some said he was ninety years old—and his kindness to all who needed it, gave him a patriarchal claim to the forbearance of all. He said and did pretty much as he liked in Rippleford; and his words were law to his poor neighbours.

"They looks like frozen daffydowndillies

with the morning rime on 'em still; that's what they looks like. They ain't a caught the sunshine as is playing on our Miss Sibyl."

"No more they haven't, Farmer Loam," a gossip answered him good-humouredly, after refreshing herself with a good look at the sweet face of our heroine as she passed.

"I suppose our Miss Madge weren't fine enough to take as a pattern; but she looks like a branch o' sweet May, she do, among all them yelk o' eggs. Fine feathers don't allers make fine birds, as e'ry one knows when they comes to pluck guinea-fowl. 'Tain't a-puffing yerself out as makes rale goodness in birds or gals either."

"And our good parson weren't good enough, neither, to please miss, 'parently. They've a-got bigger men to tie the knot for 'em, I've a-heard," another voice from the crowd remarked.

"Well; it don't signify. She've been more or less a stranger to us all her life, and she's a-going to lead her life with 'em now," was another neighbour's opinion.

But as Farmer Loam put one hand round upon his rheumatic back, and prepared to toddle homewards, one of his party urged him to wait and see all that was to be seen before he went.

"Stay and see 'em come out, father, then, do. Thay're a-putting the favours on the horses' heads ready for her. Here she comes!"

"*Un*feeling she went in, *un*feeling she comes out!" Farmer Loam grumbled in a semi-prophetic *sotto voce,* as the odalisque-like Grace Elliott passed by, leaning on her minor canon's arm.

"There ain't a pinch o' feeling in all that purty flesh. You've a-married a waxen image, my young man, and I don't believe as you'll

find it have got any more heart for you nor for us!"

The Dean, Mrs. Loraine's dear old uncle, had come to marry her daughter to his nephew, and gave her all the tender sympathy he felt she needed, more because her daughter was her daughter, than because she was parting from an idolised child.

It seemed as if a sort of secret understanding of the truth that might not be expressed prompted the dear old Dean to dwell lovingly on her happiness in keeping her Sibyl, instead of wasting breath in hypocritical regrets for her losing Grace.

Mr. Traill was present after all, and the two true churchmen made cordial acquaintance, brought thus together by the fireside of their charming neighbour and niece, Dorothea Loraine.

Mrs. Loraine and her brother-in-law the

Colonel were wholly occupied receiving and despatching the strangers whose presence had so incensed the country folk. The care of minor matters fell to the share of Sibyl and her kind friend Mr. Traill, who both of them had more trouble that day than they cared to divulge or talk of, indeed, to each other.

It was necessary to get Mr. Traill's help to persuade Mrs. Loraine's trusty old coachman, Davies, to go quietly home with his wife, and let a strong and sober young groom drive the happy pair to Lynn station after the wedding-breakfast. They also got him to put on his own gold-laced hat again, and give his wife's bonnet back to her, before many people had seen him in it.

But as Davies himself told his young mistress next day confidentially: "It all went off very comfubble, Miss Sibyl. There's always an anxiety when you has so many

strange coachmen and grooms around with the other gentlefolks' carriages. That's in the course of nature; they don't understand your mamma's particular, steady, sober ways. But it all went off remarkable comfubble. I need say no more. Just as your mamma would have wished it should go. I can't say no more than that."

"No, indeed," said Sibyl, keeping her countenance with praiseworthy gravity.

It was declared by all to have been "a gay wedding," as well as "comfubble" in the stable-yard. And it was well over, that was best of all, to those who knew what an incubus an impending wedding—where cordial love is not—can be.

Mrs. Loraine could hardly hide her despair that her child in leaving home felt nothing. Mr. Elliott did all the emotion, and did it well; leaving behind him, as usual, enthusiastic admirers of his brow, and his smile, and his

hands. He had been much gratified at his reception by the strangers and distant relations brought together to grace his wedding and its feast. He did not miss any deeper feeling, any warmer ties.

The names of all the wedding guests were well fitted to impress the readers of the fashionable and religious newspapers in which he desired notices should appear.

Grace knew that she had looked her very best, and a sort of enjoyment had come to her at the sight of the disconcerted bridesmaidens, whose pallid looks heightened the effect of her delicate carmine bloom.

The young people went their way decidedly satisfied with themselves and each other.

"What an odious girl Grace is, mamma," the outspoken Madge remarked for at least the hundredth time to Mrs. Burleigh, as they drove home in the twilight.

"She may improve, my dear. Many unfeeling girls do improve wonderfully, when they have close ties of their own tugging at their hearts."

"If Mrs. Loraine and Sibyl have found no heart, mamma, Mr. Elliott may tug in vain. I am almost sorry for him," Madge said, little thinking she was repeating, in other words, the prophetic impressions of old Father Loam on the same subject.

Madge herself, all unconscious as she was of the fact, had been the beauty of the day. Her animated, mobile, expressive face, wistfully full of tender feeling for Mrs. Loraine and Sibyl—had been the sweetest thing to be seen in Mrs. Loraine's crowded rooms. Her dress had been one of the simplest there, but in fresh pink and white, with clusters of rose-coloured hawthorn on the white chip bonnet on her sunburnt hair, she had been the personification of the freshness and purity

of spring ; or, as old Loam had declared, "As a bunch o' sweet May."

The despairing Guy had watched her from a distance, and fiercely envied the many strangers who could offer her the courtesies and compliments so freely dealt out among wedding guests with unrestrained admiration; while he felt as if a whole Arctic region of cold estrangement lay between himself and his beloved Madge Burleigh.

CHAPTER II.

"WE WILL BIDE TOGETHER, MOTHER."

"And when at last thy love shall die,
Wilt thou receive his parting breath?
Wilt thou repress each struggling sigh,
And cheer with smiles the bed of death?"

PERCY ("*O Nancy, wilt thou go with me?*").

IT was late before the busy Loraine household prepared to rest, and Mrs. Loraine herself was one of the last to risk depressing silence in her own room, though she was sadly worn out and grievously oppressed by the anxieties and emotions of the day.

She had hardly courage to ring for her maid, she so dreaded any talk over the great event

that left her heart so sorely wounded and empty.

"Oh, darling!" she cried to a silent vision in white that crept gently into her room, with its long golden tresses half unplaited, and its hands filled with dainty night-gear. "Indeed I am not companionable to-night. I cannot talk even to you."

Even while she spoke Mrs. Loraine put her hands up to her face and burst into the passion of pent-up grief that her Sibyl had foreseen in coming to her.

Sibyl now wound her arms about her step-mother and kissed her, and guided her to her couch; and after putting her to rest on it, she murmured sweet words of fondness and comfort, telling her how sure Grace felt of the happiness of her choice, and with what good courage she had gone.

"You must not begrudge her, darling mother. You must give me a double share

of love instead, and let me be your very own."

"Have you not always been so?" Mrs. Loraine sobbed out.

"No, darling! Mrs. Blight said any one could see with half an eye that I was papa's girl, and Grace all your own, so there must have been some difference, though I never felt it."

The cunning Sibyl hoped, by causing a little indignation, to have a counter-irritant to touch the grief.

"How cruel! how unfair!" Mrs. Loraine said, drying her eyes to look unutterable fondness at the golden-haired vision kneeling beside her couch. "If there was a difference, it was to your father's darling. You cannot believe there was any other. Tell me, my darling."

"We will never speak of it again. I have believed in your dearest, best love ever since I can remember; in every childish grief, in

every naughty fit, in every joy I can remember, I have found rest here," Sibyl said, kissing her mother's neck, and laying her head to rest there again like a little child. "We won't talk, darling," she continued softly. "I came to beg you to let me share your room to-night, and I have dared Prue to disturb us. After I have undressed you I am going to brush my hair here, and make myself at home until you sleep; and to-morrow I am going to have my little white bed set up in your dressing-room. I shall be happier and better if I am day and night with you. Dear old mammy, how I love you!"

And Mrs. Loraine submitted with a good grace to this sweet tyranny, and finally went to bed a calm and hopeful mother, but found it impossible to sleep, and was not sorry when the sweet-voiced daughter spoke again to scare the crowding anxieties of the darkness from her.

"You are not asleep, mother. May I talk

to you? May I ask you about my unknown mother? I want to know what justifies people in marrying. You once said my mother made you and my father promise to marry one another to take care of me. How was it? May I hear?"

"Your mother was my cousin, Sibyl, and my dearest friend; and she gave you into my hands, and made me promise that in time I would marry your father. She was dying then, wandering, and full of trouble for him and you; and, in despair, to calm her, we said *yes.* And then your father travelled, and I kept you. Such a little helpless pet you were, not a fortnight old, when she put you into my arms. But in a year he came back again, ill and miserable, weakened by grief, and suffering, too, from his old wounds in the Afghan war. He believed himself to be dying, too, and he asked me to keep my promise, and I did."

"Did you love him, mother, or was it pity?" Sibyl asked hastily.

"I loved him and pitied him, too, dear; but I was wrong in marrying a man who never loved me. He was truth itself, and he never said he did. I thought before I married that I could be satisfied with so little affection, that friendship alone would be sufficient; afterward I found I was wrong. I tell you, Sibyl—for I fear you are hesitating now in some choice you will not ask advice about—I was wrong, for the craving for love came, and I was miserable, and Grace was born. She would have been so different if she had inherited a father's love, a more complete nature. I blame myself for all her want of heart. You cannot understand me, Sibyl, but you may try to remember what I tell you of my mistake. Your father cared only for your mother and you, and had gratitude or compassion only for me. 'Sibyl!' he cried in dying. The nurse

thought it was for you he cried, but I knew it was for the light and joy of his life, your mother, his dear, dear wife. For some reasons I cannot regret what I did. As his wife only could I nurse him, and keep you, darling. I ought not to repent. He was so true, so good, so noble; his early death such a loss, my child, to you!"

"Why did you never marry again, mother? I am sure Lord Bulstrode asked you. I heard you were such a lovely young widow, and had such a mob of admirers."

"A woman should only marry once, Sibyl."

"You must have loved my father very dearly, mother. You were justified. I will never marry unless you tell me I am justified too. And if my husband will not love you too, mother, he shall not have me. I will be your Ruth, mother," the impulsive girl continued. "We will bide together, as the poor

people say in all their troubles. You and I will bide together. You shall have from me all the love my father owed you, you sweet, unselfish saint."

* * * * *

Certainly, it was difficult to believe that the tall, golden-haired matron, soft-voiced, and refined in all her wealth of womanliness, was not the mother of the tall girl with the great coils of golden hair wound about the onyx-ball comb—their voices, ways, and looks were so curiously and subtly alike. There were but a few years, and a little muffling lace more on one sweet gentle form than on the other.

"It was ridiculous," Mrs. Blight said sharply but erroneously, "to see Mrs. Loraine dress so like her daughter;" whereas really it was the daughter who copied the mother, with a loving care little short of adoration. They were almost inseparable too.

It seemed as if Sibyl's determination never

to leave Mrs. Loraine had become a firm conviction in the minds of all her admirers; for their devotion to her mother was another of the "ridiculous" facts Mrs. Blight had to rail at.

"She is as much courted," Mrs. Blight angrily asserted, "as if she was young and a beauty."

CHAPTER III.

"I WANT TO BE A REALLY GOOD WOMAN."

"And there's a downright honest purpose in her."
TENNYSON (*Princess*).

MR. TRAILL had taken to pleading colds and prior engagements of late, and carefully avoided all social gatherings on the lawns of Rippleford. He was, in consequence, declared by his merry friend Miss Loraine to be "very crusty;" and whenever he did appear, she was very hard upon him indeed, and besought her own little coterie of friends to join her in teasing him back to his former pleasantnesses.

Mrs. Loraine missed his friendly visits at luncheon-time; missed the pleasure of seeing

him rest and warm himself at her hospitable hearth, and relax those lines of care about his mouth that made him look so much older than he really was.

Sibyl, with her characteristic vivacity, vowed she would bring him back to his old cordiality or perish in the attempt.

"My dear," Mrs. Loraine said to her, "it may be a fancy of mine, but I think you have hurt him in some way or other. When you are present he is far more reserved than when by chance I see him alone."

"Then if it is my fault, I'll apologise; but if it is ill-temper, I'll worry him. A minister of the Church of England should be superior to tiffs, tantrums, and sulks. For his own good, I, his friend, must rebuke him."

So the first time the Vicar's broad-brimmed felt-hat was seen meandering above the glistening shoots of the rhododendrons and kalmias—now in their fullest beauty in Mrs.

Loraine's American garden—and his purpose of passing on to the Manor without calling on her mother was clear, Sibyl put on her Swiss hat and ran after him, and challenged :

"Speak now, or be for ever silent! If you don't explain the cause of your sudden unneighbourliness, Mr. Traill, I shall have to bear all the blame of it! Mamma declares I must have done something to annoy you. I have ransacked the corner of my conscience, where I keep all my peccadilloes, and I can find nothing with your name on it. You promised to come and mark me out a course of improving reading. You said you half suspected I had some little uncultivated reasoning power that should be seen to; and you have never come. Did your heart fail you?"

"It did," Mr. Traill confessed gravely.

"Then I *have* annoyed you?" Sibyl said penitently. "I am so sorry. Tell me what

I have said or done; but pray believe it was unintentional."

"I feel I have wasted my time too often here of late," Mr. Traill said querulously. "Croquet and bowls, tea-drinking and charades are neither fitted to my age nor my calling. I richly deserve to be made the sport of yourself and your giddy companions. 'There is no fool like an old fool,' the proverb says, and I bow my head to its wisdom. I shall come no more, as I have done, to The Beeches till I have braced myself afresh for the loneliness and self-denial of my former life. It was not without its own satisfactions —its own dignity—till I knew you. Do not try to draw me out of it, or seek to amuse yourself at the expense of a friend almost old enough to be your father."

"If you think I have done so," said Sibyl gently, hurt greatly by his tone, and still more by his averted looks, "you wrong me,

indeed you do. What can I say? If I contradict you, you will call that impertinence perhaps. All that I have ever said or done —joking or teasing—was because I liked so much to be with you, and felt so sure of your understanding friendship. You will punish me very cruelly if you withdraw it for ever."

"Not for ever," said Mr. Traill hastily. "Not for ever! only till I am stronger and can resist you better."

"But if I promise never to be saucy again? If I promise to remember that you dislike my chatter, will you try me? Come and see mamma; come back to us once more."

"Child!" Mr. Traill cried hurriedly. "I asked you not to draw me. The happiness of being with you is too great. Between us two there can never be more than there has been of trust and affection; but that is less or more than I can bear. . . Now do you know what my folly has been, my utter dis-

comfiture, my mortification, my madness! I have seen the folly of others; I have fallen into temptation with my eyes open, and I have deserved all your ridicule."

Sibyl was speechless—aghast. There was no petty vanity lurking in her nature to lessen the shock of her friend's distress. She was again face to face with a great trouble she had no power to cure.

Who shall say that her silent, mute sympathy was not the best she could give? When she spoke again her words carried the conviction to Mr. Traill's heart that he had not been played with wilfully.

"Mr. Traill, you are the third friend I have hurt in the same way this year. I want to be a really good woman, and I cause nothing but pain. I wish I was like gentle Mary Blight; no one loves her, but all trust her; while I have to hear cruel things, like what you have just said to me, from every one I try to attach—"

There was no mistaking the sorrow in her voice; it touched Mr. Traill's true heart at once.

"Have I said cruel things? I hope not. I accuse you of nothing, Miss Loraine. You cannot help being—what you are," he said, wisely flying from the temptation of dwelling on her sweetness. "I have resisted more cunning charms, Sibyl. But your bright, light-hearted innocence has undone me. Forgive me if I was cowardly enough to blame you instead of myself."

Mr. Traill held out his hand in token that he would go on his solitary way; but Sibyl would not see it. She paced beside him a little further in silence, trying to put a request into words that were not *drawing* in the sense he had complained of.

"You should not punish mamma for my faults, Mr. Traill. We have loved you so much, and missed you so much." The coaxing

puss felt she might say that. "We have felt your desertion such a loss! If I promise to keep away as much as I can, do come and sit with mamma, and lunch with her; and when this pain is forgotten, be friendly with me again. It cannot last. Please tell me you will try to forgive and forget it, and I shall feel happier, and will say good-bye."

"Indeed I will try," promised Mr. Trail.

"Mr. Traill," Sibyl said, stopping and forcing him to stop and listen to her grave last words, "no one must know—even mamma would not wish to hear—what you have said to me to-day. If people like to invent unkind reasons for our break, let them; only help me with your advice if you think I am ever doing wrong by any one else. I want to be a really good woman—indeed I do."

It was an immense relief to Mr. Traill to hear Sibyl's belief in the healing power of secresy.

"God bless her!" he mentally prayed. "I have not cast my heart before a Delilah! I have no need to be ashamed of loving such a true woman."

* * * * *

"Will he not come in, darling?" Mrs. Loraine asked.

"Not to-day, mamma."

"Had you pained him, Sibyl?"

"Yes, mamma; and he knows how sorry I am. Please don't ask me any questions, darling mammy, because I feel inclined to tell fibs about it all. It will all come right in a little while. Be *very* kind to him when he comes back to us."

And even as Sibyl spoke to her, Mrs. Loraine guessed the truth, and her true woman's instinct told her, as it had told her child, that no one ought to know what Mr. Traill had said to her.

How could he help it? And how sacredly

should all such tender feeling be regarded even if it could not be returned.

Mr. Traill was indeed made much of when he reappeared at The Beeches. The ties between him and the beautiful Dorothea Loraine were drawn closer and closer by their affection for the irresistible Sibyl, even as trust in the Vicar's friendship had gained a subtle and solemn new value in the inmost heart of the unspoiled beauty who wished to be "a really good woman!"

CHAPTER IV.

MAKING AMENDS.

"And by all kindly deeds that power can do,
Prove that the brave good heart hath come of lineage true."

MRS. NORTON (*Child of the Islands*).

POOR old Guy! He was fairly awake now, and willing to grope his way to usefulness in his blundering way, if he only knew in what direction usefulness lay. And light was very soon let in upon his way.

Sir Henry Vernon had at last discovered that he and his people were being cheated wholesale by his bailiff, Evans, as Madge indeed had implied. Probably the fact was

known to every neighbour before any Vernon had even heard it hinted at.

He wrote to Guy, urging him to come at once, and look after matters so nearly concerning his own interests ; and Guy, nothing loth to leave the scene of his late defeat, went off to the Chase, and did all he could again.

His work now was most disheartening. He listened for hours to the old Baronet's account of Evan's rascality, and hunted for days through ill-kept piles of papers and dusty stores of old bills for receipts and proofs of that rascality, which Evans had taken good care to destroy. So far, Guy's work was as useless as it was distasteful to him.

And then, most unfairly, Guy came in for Sir Henry's opinion of his utility at the Chase, which was as undisguised as Madge's, and expressed in far more aggravating lan-

guage, and yet quite as impossible to resent. When a near relation seems to be choking himself to death while he is swearing at you, you must give help and remedies; virtuous indignation would be utterly wasted. Guy even had a faint idea that in bearing with his old tyrant, and giving the help and remedies, he was exercising a more respectable possession than those jeered at by Margaret Burleigh.

However, Guy's indignation had not long to be swallowed; a kindly, tender patience was soon required in place of it; for the old man had a stroke of paralysis, which deadened his passions as completely as it numbed his frame. He became as quiet and contented as he had before been restless and dissatisfied; now, Guy's company was his greatest solace. Guy read aloud daily for many hours to his silent kinsman, caring nothing if his time seemed to be wasted on the

dull listener, as his voice and companionship were evidently soothing. And Guy did all that man could do to lessen the gloom of that life in death.

The young man's cares and long watches beside the invalid were shared by a favourite servant of old Sir Henry's, the sister of his head keeper, a fine, strapping Norfolk lass, Lucy Fellowes, gentle and womanly withal, to whom he had given charge of his ornamental dairy and choice poultry. Before his seizure, the old man had spent his most peaceful hours in watching this woman's work at the Old Lodge; and when the master's illness was known, she had rushed up to the great house with such an eager offer of help, that Guy had at once decided she should be posted by the sick man as nurse.

In times of sudden, upsetting alarm or distress, the heads of the household do not always come uppermost, and Sir Henry

seemed so content in the strong, yet soft hands of the Norfolk dairy-woman, that Guy spoke and thought of her as a perfect God-send among the many chattering and incapable maid-servants.

Madge Burleigh had a great bout of remorse when she heard how steadily Guy was devoting himself to his sick kinsman, and the business matters at the Chase.

Guy's mother had offered her help and presence, but Guy had refused both. He did not wish her to be mixed up with Sir Henry's household; and she could not press the matter, as she remembered that Guy's father's wishes had been as outspoken of old. Sir Henry's life, and Sir Henry's ways had been a sore subject for many a long year, before Mrs. Vernon became a widow. But Mrs. Vernon drove constantly to the Chase to enquire for the invalid; and to kiss the tawny young giant, whose seclusion was

almost as complete as that of the sleeping beauty in the wood. A daily tramp with his dogs was all the recreation or freedom Guy now allowed himself; and a daylight bath and swim in the cold Ripple his only tonic to counteract the weakening influences of his life in the sick room.

It was a pleasant surprise to Mrs. Vernon when Madge appeared at the drawing-room window one day, just after lunch, begging to be allowed to accompany her to the Chase. Nothing could look sweeter or brighter than the young fairy in blue, leaning in at the window to coax Guy's mother to take her to see "dear good Guy."

She was so blushing and happy, the very people they met on the road turned to send a "bless her!" after the carriage as it passed.

Guy was out when they reached the Chase; but Mrs. Vernon passed into the house for a long confab with the housekeeper, and left

Madge to go her way to the green terrace, under the long drawing-room windows.

This was the time of all others to see the Chase in its full beauty. The great magnolias made the whole air luscious with perfume, the banksia roses were in full bloom, the green terrace itself was soft and bright as velvet, its mignonette borders were full of happy bees; birds sang and flitted from the shrubs to the lawn and from the lawn to the glorious surrounding woods,—the whole air was full of summer sweetness.

From this green terrace Madge could overlook the river and the park glades beyond, where the deer lay in groups, resting in the shade of their own little aërial forests of antlers. Through the great ride in the woods could be seen the Old Lodge, a miniature of the great house itself. There were the same stone-mullioned windows under the stone-roofed gables; the same clusters of twisted

and grotesque chimneys, the same grinning gurgoyles; almost the same masses of roses and magnolias, making each window into a separate bower of sweetness and beauty.

The Chase had always been Madge's imaginary Eden. The great house, the great stables, with kennels beyond, the great gardens, the stately terraces, the herds of noble deer, each and all came up to Madge's idea of what wealth, and long experience in spending wealth well, could create as a home.

And never had Madge been more impressed by the beauty and grandeur of the Chase than she was now, basking in the glorious sunshine on the green terrace.

Suddenly a cold touch on the hand roused her from her trance of admiration, and she found Guy's Brian giving her an eager welcome with his kisses, while his master was literally hurling himself up the slopes, wild

with joy, at the sight of the slim figure in blue flitting to and fro upon the long deserted terrace.

"Madge, how truly good of you to come! Who are you with?—My mother! You are both as sweet as manna in the desert! Will you come in among the grim Vernons and their pearl-strangled squaws? No; well, stay where you are. I will just see my mother, and bring you out some fruit here. Guard her well, Brian."

CHAPTER V.

WHAT A PITY!

"The still-vexed Bermoothes."
SHAKESPEARE (*Tempest*).

How completely Guy had forgiven, or perhaps forgotten, that evening in the fernery.

But how changed he was! He was no longer the slow, hesitating admirer she had so often out-manœuvred at Pendrills,—that was clear. How well he looked! How glad she was she came. What a day of days she now felt it to be!

If it was not for the sick man upstairs—in the room perhaps over the great magnolia, where the soft green silken blind was flutter-

ing out so silently over the white roses—Madge could have sung now, she felt, musically enough to content herself.

She was even now unconsciously singing a song of youth, and health, and love, with every full healthy pulse of her loving heart, every smile and dimple of her bright young face, every sparkle of her deep grey eyes.

Suddenly an irresistible impulse seized her, and she bent down and kissed the faithful Brian, whose head rested on her knees, and whose stedfast eyes were bright with the excitement of meeting again an old friend.

"Isn't there an old proverb, Madge, that justifies me in taking Brian's debt of gratitude upon myself?" Guy asked joyously, coming suddenly out of one of the great windows by which Madge had seated herself, both his hands so laden with cakes and fruit that he had to deposit his burden at Madge's feet before he could offer her any portion of

it. If he had ended there it would have been well, but the sight of his darling had half-crazed him ; after his long and almost solitary confinement his heart was starved, and cried eagerly for food, and more, more ! "Tell me, Madge, are you sorry for your cruelty ?" he asked, after she had fed from his hand. "I must tell you how strangely you are with me in all my dreams, Madge, in all the long watches in Sir Henry's living tomb. Promise to try and love me, Madge ; if not now, later, that this great gloomy place may not hereafter be quite a desert to me."

"Don't be hateful, Guy," the perverse child answered. "Don't spoil my pleasure in coming to see my old play-fellow by thrusting the future Sir Guy Vernon before me in that horrible way."

"Not so horrible as the present *is*, and the future *may be* to me, Madge. Have you no heart, Madge ? — not one warm, tender,

womanly spot about you!" he went on wildly, and seizing her left hand, which was still resting on Brian's aristocratic canine head, he turned over its shell-pink palm, and before she could draw it away, pressed his face down upon it and kissed it passionately. "That is my mark! You shall carry that till you one day give it back to me, Madge. No man shall have the power to take that brand off!"

"That is cowardly—wicked!" gasped poor frightened Madge, burning all over with surprise and shame; and something more subtle far, that flew through her veins, and seemed indeed to brand her as his, on every fibre of her frame. "Cruel! cowardly! because there is no one to defend me."

"Defend you from what? my love? That shall yet be your truest shelter and defence, Madge—I swear it. I have seen my life differently since you jeered at me at Pendrills. I am your slave no longer. When I

am ready for you I shall pluck you from your parent stem, and carry you off on my breast as I do this rose." He broke off a cluster of sweet white roses as he spoke, put them slowly to his lips and into his breast, as seriously as if indeed it was his real love he had thus gathered and was putting to rest. "Poor little Madge," he said softly, seeing her puzzled distress; "you must not really learn to fear me. I am not mad, Madge, only half-starved; hungering and thirsting for a little honest love. I will bring my mother to you, and you shall go home to your easy, innocent, self-satisfying life, and leave me to the slow torture of watching the deathbed of a man who has lived the accursed, loveless life you would doom me to."

* * * * *

He brought Mrs. Vernon out to her. She looked calm, smiling, and satisfied after long consultations over piles of snowy damask,

doomed to be rough-dried, and summer furniture-covers to be carefully stored away, now Sir Henry's state was one of hopeless invalidism, and the great house was no longer to be a show and the pride of the county. Mrs. Vernon was ready to go, leaving peace and goodwill behind her.

Not so Madge, who had sown the wind in her girlish arrogance, and was reaping the whirlwind; she went her way trembling with Guy's strange brand still burning on her palm. She could not help taking one shy little look at her enemy as they left, and carried away the remembrance of a very pale and sad-looking giant, with weary wistful eyes, that neither hope nor joy seemed to have visited for weeks.

What could she do? Oh! it was impossible to marry Guy. How could she be sure that old *playfellow-love* was all she *should* feel. Such a strong, though vague belief was

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in her heart that *married-love* must be greater and all-powerful; such a longing for a grand, overwhelming, venerating passion was hidden away in some mysterious depth of her soul. Poor Guy, till to-day she knew he had been at her feet—her slave, as he had owned. Madge's husband must tower above her. She must honour him, revere him, worship him! "Poor old Guy! dear old Guy," she even said before she slept that night, "What a pity he cares so much for me. What a pity!"

CHAPTER VI.

SIR HENRY VERNON DIES.

"Set thine house in order, for thou shalt die, and not live."—ISAIAH xxxviii. 1.

FROM the day of Madge's memorable visit to the Chase Mrs. Burleigh noticed a change in her. She was no longer so joyous or so frank. She sat silent when with others, and was oftener than ever to be found nestling in the old west window with a book or work lying neglected near her.

Mrs. Burleigh was not one of those mothers who think confidence can be snared or ferreted like a rabbit, and she would have liked her daughter's to be given to her spontane-

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ously; "still," she thought, "my darling Madge is in trouble, and perhaps afraid to begin to tell me her own story," so she went straight to the point:

"Madge, my child, are you unhappy?" The little woman addressed had turned her face quickly from the inquisitive taper Mrs. Burleigh brought to her bedside, but not before her mother had seen the traces of tears upon it. "Can I help or advise, my darling? Is anything wrong between you and Guy that we old mothers can make right? Trust me, my Madge, if there is, and speak to me."

"Nothing, pet mother, that I can well tell you," Madge answered, with her tearful face still turned away. "I *am* very unhappy because I can't find out what is right and what is wrong; what is due to myself, and what to Guy; for it is about Guy, mother. I know you will not tell that to any one."

"Could any one younger give you help or

consolation, darling? Could Teresa comfort you better than your old mother?" asked generous-minded Mrs. Burleigh.

The averted face was swiftly raised to hers now, with a tender kiss ready, and returned:

"Oh, mother! there is no one but you I could ever speak to about Guy. When I know clearly what I feel I will tell you. I must have time to clear up my puzzles; meantime, dear mammy, let me be alone with you."

So Mrs. Burleigh had patience, and forbore further questioning, and Madge gradually recovered her spirits and activity, and helped the gentle little lady, Miss Ryles, in her care of the household, and scoured the country with her to do good to poor neighbours, till the panting, overfed "Highland Laddies," her ponies, had reason to rue the day that took Madge to the Chase, and brought on

such a reaction from her short love-sickness, if her reveries in the west window could be so called.

Madge was as unlike a love-sick maiden as Mrs. Blight herself could be, but her neighbours remarked the girl's new gravity, and how rarely her white teeth and dimples were seen now. And Mrs. Blight thought it "more than probable Mr. Vernon had withdrawn his suit!" the "girl's airs had no doubt disgusted him," and if so she was strangely enough inclined to dislike the girl less. "But if it could all have been cleared up it would have been better for every one; as indeed she had said over and over again!"

* * * * *

In little more than three months after Madge's visit to the Chase, a grand funeral procession wound its way through the woods and out of the Old Lodge gates to the family

vault of the Vernons at Longbourne. A vast number of neighbours and tenants, retainers, and gentlemen in rich hatbands and scarves, supposed to be physicians and lawyers and distant connections of the deceased Baronet, swelled the procession in mourning coaches, and gave the length and bulk to the undertaker's charges that Mrs. Grundy approves when a great man dies.

Sir Henry in his death, if not in his life, was highly respectable, and his funeral, all agreed, was as gloomily gorgeous as it could possibly be. The young heir had begrudged nothing, that was clear; and as chief mourner, pale and sad after his long and weary vigils by the afflicted man, he won the hearts of all who looked on him and knew his story.

And so Guy returned from Longbourne and reigned at the Chase. He set things in order, and carried out all Sir Henry's private directions, granted requests, and went over

dusty inventories; he heard the explanations of the family lawyers, and did all that could be expected of a model heir; and a tramp for his dogs' sake, and the morning swim in the Ripple were still the only recreations he allowed himself, except an occasional visit to his mother.

"It was to be hoped he was not going to mourn and mope for ever for a hardened sinner like Sir Henry Vernon," Mrs. Blight said; "he ought to marry now and have done with it. One such old monk in a family was quite enough for the neighbourhood. If he was to be no better than Sir Augustus Vansittart, it was flying in the face of Providence."

But the rest of his old neighbours spoke of the tall gentleman in deep mourning with very different feelings. Most of them admired him immensely, especially when they spoke of him at Pendrills, which led Madge to

remark with a touch of her old scornful perversity:

"If one admires him at all it must be hugely, unless you admire him bit by bit, a little every day."

And once more she took him for the original giant of all her stories to her little nephews and nieces, and Teresa and Leo having half forgotten their great, good-natured friend, would sit wide-eyed and breathless while Madge described how "Yug" ate, and spoke, and stretched, and yawned, and carried little children high on his shoulders as easily as if they had been spillikins.

"Yug" came through the wicket gate under the silver birches as often as he could again, but only on business. One of his Herculean labours was to get the Chase cleared of the household about Sir Henry. No one had a word to say except in praise of the heir's liberality, but the old set disappeared, and

gentle Miss Ryles was offered the post of housekeeper, and her brother was installed as a quiet and sober major-domo at the Chase. The new maids were quiet and industrious. Sir Guy's reign was as strong a contrast to Sir Henry's as that of William and Adelaide was to that of George IV.

* * * * *

Sir Guy himself was no longer the hesitating person we first knew him under the witcheries of Margaret Burleigh. He was neither slow of speech, nor shy to speak. The man had measured himself, and knew he had as much strength and power of endurance and common sense as the men about him. His was no longer an objectless life. He felt himself a match for his sweet shrew in every way now.

The Chase was becoming a model home. Sir Guy was quietly carrying out a great reform, and laying the foundations for the

great and lasting happiness of all about him. He was "putting his mark, and it was a good mark, upon the soil to which he was born," as Madge had so saucily boasted she would do if she was in his place.

Mrs. Burleigh's poor little friend, Miss Ryles, "who had seen better days," was again, in her own estimation, a prosperous woman; while in Sir Guy's she was not only an able and orderly head of his large household, but a loving and grateful friend of the beautiful young mistress he hoped to bring home to the Chase to share in all his happiness.

CHAPTER VII.

THE THIRD AND LAST TIME OF ASKING.

"There's something tells me, but it is not love,
I would not lose you."
SHAKESPEARE (*Merchant of Venice*, act iii. sc. 2).

WE have said that Sir Guy Vernon felt himself quite a match for his sweet shrew in all respects since he had made trial of his own strength of will and powers of endurance.

He was no longer her slave; or if he still wore his chains, he knew how to hide them perfectly. He was always delighted to meet his dear friends, when chance favoured him

with a glimpse of the tell-tale face, where the flying blushes assured him that, on a certain shell-pink palm his brand was still burning. But it was now said he had come to the Cedars to arrange for the removal of all his bachelor possessions to Vernon's Chase. Fatima, Feroza, and the Irish deerhounds that had hitherto given a fame to Mrs. Vernon's stable-yard, were to be moved into splendid new quarters; and Rippleford would never again be the home of Sir Henry's nephew and heir.

He came suddenly round the corner of the church, and met Mrs. Burleigh and Madge as they entered its porch one Sunday morning, that was all. Madge need not have trembled so all through the service; or wondered if dear Mr. Traill, with his "finally," and "in conclusion," would ever end that sermon.

He did at last. Good, earnest, charitable, large-minded Mr. Traill; he did at last bless

his congregation, and let them disperse in little groups to their homes filled with the Sunday aroma of roast beef and baked potatoes.

Mrs. Vernon and her son took, as they often took of yore, the beech-wood path to the wicket-gate of Pendrills. Seeing them follow this path Mrs. Burleigh joined them instead of going round by the road. Mrs. Vernon had been a little ailing. Nothing could be more natural than that her son should give her his arm, and lead her gently along, and afterwards join Mrs. Burleigh in urging her to lunch at Pendrills. Nothing could be less natural than that Madge should follow alone and speechless behind the trio; and then dash away to her own room, and remain there, listening and palpitating, while the others waited in the garden for the luncheon-bell.

For Sir Guy said and did nothing the

least alarming. His mother engrossed all his thoughts.

"He has so many new cares and pleasures now, he will think no more of me," Madge Burleigh thought to herself; "we shall be great friends and nothing more till he marries."

She thought it all out fully that evening, watching the sunset, and pretended to feel a keen interest in the future Lady Vernon. Somehow, she did not think she would be nice, and Guy would find it out too late.

But next morning Sir Guy stalked in from the beech-woods and requested an interview with Mrs. Burleigh. And again Margaret Burleigh fled to her own room, and tried in vain to silence the fears that shook her from head to foot, and made it impossible to her to occupy herself. She felt quite sick and chilly when she heard her mother coming along the corridor.

Mrs. Burleigh's eyes bore witness that Guy's interview had moved her deeply; but she spoke cheerily enough now.

"Madge darling, Guy has told me of all his past disappointments, and he begs to see you. If you love him, my child, I am sure you may trust him. He thinks some of Mrs. Blight's wicked reports may have reached you. We must not judge others, Madge, as severely as we judge ourselves; and I would not have you treat him, darling, with either coldness or caprice."

Mrs. Burleigh waited for even a few broken words in reply, but she waited in vain.

Madge stood, with her hands clasped together drooping before her, and looked far, far away, out of the window, long past the familiar home objects surrounding her, into a world of sorrowful puzzle and doubts.

"It would make me very happy to give my darling into Guy's faithful hands," Mrs. Bur-

leigh then said; "but," in a trembling voice, she added, "I could not bear to part with you to a stranger."

"Do you wish to part with me, then, mamma?" Madge asked in a strange hard voice, all unlike her usual honey-sweet tones.

"Oh, Madge! you know I am thinking of your happiness — never less of my own."

"Forgive me, mamma. Mamma, tell me; when my father spoke to you, did you know at once what to say? Were you quite happy?"

"I never thought of answering, child. Your dear father was the grandest and best man I ever knew. He said what he wished and arranged all as he wished; and after the usual trouble—a little with my father—we were married. But Guy is waiting, darling. You may indeed trust to Guy. Brush your

hair off your forehead, darling; it is prettier so."

"Never mind how I look, mamma."

Those few words made Mrs. Burleigh tremble for Guy's success; and Guy owned that Madge's sad, pale face struck terror into his heart.

"Are you ill, Madge? Pray sit down and hear me patiently."

"I am so sorry you sent for me, Sir Guy."

"Do not speak so to me, Madge. You know what I come to ask. It is the old, old story. Surely you will not doom me to a lonely, unnatural life. Is The Chase to be filled with sunshine and the music of a wife's voice, Madge? or are all the fruits of life to prove dead-sea apples, and turn to bitter ashes as I taste them? Madge, darling, I will be more true and tender than man has ever yet been to woman. Trust me. Your mother trusts me."

"My mother, your mother, all think of you, Guy. I must think for myself," Madge said, almost in a whisper. "I cannot marry you."

"Is there any obstacle I do not know of?" Guy asked, in alarm. "Confide in me, Madge. Speak, my own dear playfellow Madge!"

"Only this," Madge said sadly, looking at him for the first time fairly and trustfully. "If you were a poor man I should not feel so frightened. I may love Vernon's Chase and all its beauty and grandeur, Guy, but you—I do not love."

"You do, Madge. I have seen love, and I know it. You have let the baseness and falsehoods of others frighten you. I will be content with very little. Give me that little, and I will give you every pulse of my heart. Will that not content you?"

"No, Guy. I could not take so much and

give so little. Marriage, I think, should be a great, solemn exchange of perfect love and trust, for ever and ever. If real love came to me, I think my heart would seem to leap from me. It would be to some one far above me—wise, and great, and magnanimous—so that I might revere him, obey him, give my life for him."

She turned away with burning cheeks and tear-bright eyes, as she owned what her love might be.

"Find a loving wife elsewhere, and forget me," she added gently.

"And leave you to make your great, solemn exchange of perfect love with some one else. Never!" Guy panted out fiercely.

"And I, too, say never," Madge answered proudly. "I can never give an honest, untouched heart such as a wife's should be. I carry your words to scare me—I carry your brand to burn me here." She held out her

little trembling hand. "I feel miserable, I feel ashamed. You should believe me when I tell you, Guy. If you love me, give me no more pain."

"Is this the end of all?" Guy muttered. "Oh, Madge!"

In a moment how Guy was changed—all hope, all courage seemed to have been wrung out of him. He was white in the face, trembling. He laughed a short, unnatural, scornful laugh, saying:

"I was a lout to dream of gaining a fairy's love; was I not, Madge?"

Madge offered him both her hands, saying, in her distress:

"Oh, Guy, forgive me! Dear Guy, bid me good-bye."

He turned upon her angrily again. "No, child. Give me no sham courtesies. We two have taken hands for the last time, unless for a solemn covenant. If you ever learn that

in my honest love there is neither misery nor shame, *then* you may give me your hands!"

And he hurled himself out of the room.

Madge remembered every trivial detail of that sad parting, as if it had been burnt into her memory. Every nerve, every sense seemed to be strained, till all was pain. Every sound, every scent was hateful to her. The very mignonette Guy had brought with him and thrown on the table became dreadful to her for a time.

She heard his steps louder and longer than she had ever followed a sound before; the echo seemed to beat upon her.

She went to her room a weary woman, wondering if she should ever feel young and happy again, and, above all,—if she should ever see Guy again.

And Mrs. Burleigh found her sick and

feverish when she went to seek a shy and loving child. And she darkened the room, and let Madge lie down and turn her face to the wall.

Poor honest-hearted, mistaken Madge!

CHAPTER VIII.

THE SCANDAL.

> "Speak of me as I am; nothing extenuate,
> Nor set down aught in malice."
>
> SHAKESPEARE (*Othello*, act v. sc. 2).

NEXT day the village rang with the clamour of a great scandal. It was as if the church bells were ringing it forth. Every neighbour had a pull and rang the changes differently, but the great notes remained the same, and their noise, their discordant clang, reached far and wide.

The most charitable version of the story was that late the night before, Lucy Fellowes, the dairywoman at Vernon's Chase,—who was

promoted to be Sir Henry's nurse in his last illness,—had forced herself into gentle Mrs. Vernon's presence, and had obliged Sir Guy to own her as his wife. Mrs. Vernon was broken-hearted, but had shown spirit enough to order them both from her house, and they were gone.

Pinner brought Mrs. Burleigh the news when she opened her shutters ; and to prevent Madge being shocked, Mrs. Burleigh had wrapped herself in the first shawl she could seize and flew to her. As if this wild-looking mother, absolutely breathless with distress, was not shock enough. Mrs. Burleigh panted out her comfort.

"Don't be frightened, Madge, love. The wretch shall never come near you again. Cruel, false, wicked Guy !"

"Guy, mother ? Cruel and false ! Indeed he is not ! Who has dared to set you against him ?"

Here Pinner made an attempt to renew her tragic effect upon Miss Madge as upon Mrs. Burleigh, but failed, for Miss Madge gave her no time to give her version of the great scandal.

"Is it you, Pinner? Go out of my room, please. I will have no listeners and tell-tales here."

Poor Pinner, for once blameless, had the womanly feeling to turn away and do as she was bid, silently this time.

With many pet names and consoling parentheses Mrs. Burleigh then broke the news to Madge; and, finding Madge quite silent and white, felt as if she had murdered her. Then a vague idea came to the poor mother to save her child by flight, away from home, Guy, and that terrible, brazen Lady Vernon.

"But you say *they* are gone, mother," Madge at last found voice to say; a voice so

low, and words so slow, that Mrs. Burleigh was thrilled through by them, simple as they were. "Why did his mother drive him away? Poor old Guy; dear old Guy!" Madge said again, slowly, faintly, through her quivering lips.

"He must be dear to us no more, my child; dear to nobody any more. He should be punished!" Mrs. Burleigh said, growing cruel in her terror, as many women do. "Only yesterday, when he was holding my hands and begging for you, Madge, he had this brazen, wicked wife hidden away like Rochester's in 'Jane Eyre,' ready to spring upon us. How unnatural I thought that book, and yet Guy is as bad."

"Guy never told a lie in his life, mother. He is not here to explain, and it may all be false. Pinner has dreamt it."

"No, darling, no. Baker brought the news."

"Don't believe it, mother darling. I won't. I will wait, wait, wait, till Guy tells me himself. Remember what he calls the very marrow of English justice—fair-play—to believe a man innocent till his guilt is clearly proved. Remember our royal motto, '*Honi soit qui mal y pense.*' Guy, I will never give you up—never, never, if you are in trouble! Dear old Guy!"

* * * * *

"Do let us dress, mother," Madge said, raising her face presently from the pillow on which she had hidden it after this outburst. "I am so cold."

Her teeth were chattering, her face was as pale as death. Let us hope she was only cold, and that she believed all she said, at least while she said it.

We believe that the veil which had hidden Margaret Burleigh's inner heart had been torn

from it during those few moments, and that she knew now that she loved the sinner, Guy. Should she fling a stone after him? Oh, no; rather stand up to hide his retreat, and be cut by every flint the cowardly rabble dared to fling, if Guy, *her Guy*, had been tempted and had fallen. "Her Guy, oh, had it come to this! Now it was too late! too late!"

And Margaret Burleigh strove to dress as she did every day; but there were pauses when the sweet white girl stood as still as a statue, with her face hidden in her hands, as still, and almost as cold as death.

* * * * *

To Mrs. Blight that miserable morning was one of perfect triumph. She "always knew that some day or other that young man's real character would show itself." She had "waited for this," she said, as cheerfully as if the expectations realised were to bring some longed-for joy to herself and others.

"I wonder how Mrs. Burleigh and Mrs. Loraine feel now, after the outrageous way they have courted that wicked young wretch for their daughters ever since his return from Constantinople?"

"Oh, mamma! don't, pray don't say that," Mary Blight found courage to urge. "He has been like an elder brother to Miss Burleigh ever since they were children — ever since poor William Burleigh was killed in the Crimea."

"Nonsense!" snapped Mrs. Blight; "I don't believe in brothers and sisters like that. Brothers are for ever nagging and finding fault, or why did Dr. Watts write 'Let dogs delight to bark and bite' for them?"

"Look at Mr. Douglas Burleigh then," said the exact Eliza. "He's a good brother enough, I'm sure, mamma."

"There are exceptions, of course," Mrs.

Blight owned. "But you talk only to contradict me, Eliza, When *you* rush out to meet your brother John, and come in hanging on his arm, blushing with joy, as Miss Madge did when that red-haired giant came back from Turkey, you may ask me to believe in brother and sister trash—not before."

It was a sad pity, Mrs. Blight said, she had paid a round of visits only a few days before, *now* there was so much to talk of in Rippleford; but she wrote off a number of letters to friends she cared nothing whatever for, telling them all she could learn, and all she could imagine of the great Vernon scandal; "which," according to her idea of what was well on such an occasion, she "determined to make known to all, far and wide." And as she blotted her last letter, she felt she had indeed spent that morning well.

"Guy Vernon's crime is a warning to all mothers; and all mothers might have been prepared for it if my estimate of that young man's character had been taken," she said triumphantly as she departed to post the letters herself.

CHAPTER IX.

GUY SENT ME TO YOU.

"These are not natural events; they strengthen
From strange to stranger."

SHAKESPEARE.

MRS. VERNON came to Pendrills while still the untasted breakfast—with Guy's mignonette in the midst—mocked the sad inmates of the morning-room there by its brightness.

"Guy sent me to you," were her first words, "to tell his dearest friends the whole truth."

"Tell me, dear friend," Mrs. Burleigh said, "are they gone?"

"They went at daylight. One of the

children was ill, and Guy was as impatient to be off as Lady Vernon herself."

"*Children!*" gasped Mrs. Burleigh, "*how dreadful!*"

"Two. Boys. But for them, she said, she would never have troubled Guy, and I quite believe her. The deceit, the villainy, was all Sir Henry's."

"Madge, dear, let me speak alone with your mother."

But Madge gave a little sobbing cry, and begged:

"Do let me stay. I must hear of deceit and villainy some day; let me hear of it near you and mamma. Dear Mrs. Vernon, let me hear everything too."

She sat down at Mrs. Vernon's feet, saying softly to herself, "I knew it! I felt it! Dear old Guy!"

"Guy was sadly overtired last night. He could hardly speak when he came home. His

eyes were bloodshot, a sure sign of trouble with Guy. He said something of being happier as a poor man without a shirt, than as the owner of Vernon's Chase. Something I thought him wicked for saying, but it was a *presentiment.* How often we don't know how sensible silly things are."

"Don't stop to think, dear Mrs. Vernon," Madge urged eagerly. "What did Guy do?"

"Guy put out the lights, for his head ached. He said he would go for a tramp, but I begged him not; I'm sure I do not know why, except that one does so often say, 'Oh, pray don't!' when a person wishes to do something particularly. I caught it from Mr. Vernon, I think, luckily; for if she had come while Guy was out, what should I have done!"

"What did Guy do, dear Mrs. Vernon?" Madge urged again very gently.

"He sat still in the dark, child. It looked

so very cheerless, I went in and lit the fire, just to brighten the room. Then Guy in his sweet way said: 'I shall be all right, mother, if I may be quite quiet and silent for a time.'

"So I went away, of course; but soon I heard Graves go in, and speak, and come out twice, and go back again with double footsteps, and then Guy's voice saying, 'Come in, Lucy. Why did you not send in your name at once? Leave us, Graves.' As I had left the drawing-room door open, in case Guy wanted me, I distinctly heard sobbing, and Guy talking in a *solid voice*, as doctors do when they are persuading people to have something dreadful done to them; and then I heard the woman's voice raised with rage or fear. She choked her words out one over the other—'Never! I never will! I would sooner starve first!'

"And then, God forgive me for my evil

thoughts, I ran across the hall, and went to take the girl's part against my son, and found her trying to get a paper Guy held high above his head. She looked so grand. She is big, and fair—a great creamy woman, with crisp golden hair all curling about her head, like pictures I have seen somewhere, but I forget now. Guy said: 'This is my mother, Lucy,' and she let her great white arms fall, and curtsied, and dropped sideways on a chair, hiding her face, and said: 'Tell her yourself, Mr. Guy, please do.'

"'Mother,' Guy said, 'this poor Lucy Fellowes has come to tell me of a great wrong. She firmly believes herself to be Sir Henry's wife—not but what he may have cheated *her* as cruelly as he *seems* now to have cheated *me*—She says she was married to him five years ago at her own home in Norfolk.'

"'Show her my paper,' Lucy said, with her face still hidden.

"'There, mother. She tells me she has two boys; Harry is four years old; little Guy is two. They have written to say the little one is ill, and Lucy wants help and advice for him.'

"'Sir Henry said when I was in real trouble I was to come to you, Mr. Guy, and I *am* in *mortal trouble* now. I didn't ask for mourning,' Lucy went on: 'I went straight home when Mrs. Dorking ordered me out. I don't want help from anybody, except a doctor for my baby, and comforts while he is sick. I'll work and keep myself as I promised I would. Sir Henry told me never to expect anything. I never did. I waited till he failed and nursed him faithfully, as I said I would. He said Mr. Guy would care for me from time to time, and when I grew old and sick, if I showed him my paper; and till now I've kept my word in all.'

"'Nobly,' said Guy. 'Speak to her, mother; comfort her. Think of her loneliness, and the insolence of those wretched jades at The Chase, who would all gladly have been what Lucy was not—'

"Lucy interrupted him:

"'I was not! Come to Norfolk yourself, Mr. Guy, and see the church and the old books; mother and father were there, brother William was there—I wish I'd minded William; he foresaw harm would come of it. But I'd given my word to Sir Henry. He said he'd be all alone at the last, when the angel of death came for him, and he could never bear to think of it. He did suffer. You left him too much alone, Mr. Guy. He was *skeared*.'

"She had turned her face to us now, and spoke fast, and I am sure truly. She has a lovable face, my dear friends, frank and sweet and very, very sad.

"Then she said: 'Help me, Mr. Guy, and let me go. Give my certificate to the lady, and let her burn it if 'twill ruin you.'

"'She has tried to burn this, mother. She is so troubled at my wrongs. I tell her,' Guy went on, 'we must search this matter to the very foundation, she for her boys, and I for my honour. Suppose I went with her to-morrow; the sooner I know my fate, the better. I must not keep the truth back one day, mother.'

"So it was settled, and to-day at six they took the train at Lynn, and must be well on their way by this time to take Dr. Farse from Norwich to the little Guy.

"'Mother,' Guy said, 'you will make her happy here to-night; and to-morrow we go, at daylight, Lucy.'

"Poor thing, she seemed to trust us so completely, it almost broke my heart," Mrs. Vernon declared in her nervous confusion.

"I kissed her, and then Guy came and kissed me, which made me cry bitterly, and when we were safe upstairs she told me about Sir Henry's death. It was very terrible; fear brought back strength to him at the last, and he clung to her, and cried aloud for help and mercy, and then shuddered away under the clothes and died. Not one of the maids would speak to her, or share a room with her, so she returned to Sir Henry's bedside, and there Guy found her sobbing her heart out. And he brought her down to his library and fed her, and covered her up upon his sofa, and sat with her there all night, reading. Oh, Madge, Madge!" cried the poor tender-hearted lady, "he is an angel! But it is all for the best now.

"Guy came and spoke to me before I went to bed. I never knew such a marriage would set aside Sir Henry's will and all the codicils, and take everything from my Guy.

But all, all is gone. Guy says all he has done, all he has spent, is wrong—a sort of theft. So he has debts and no income; but he could tell me no more last night. I said it was infamous!

"'No,' said Guy, 'not infamous, but cruelly unfair. Five or six years ago I could have done something for myself, if he had only told me I was a beggar! But let us be thankful, mother, Lucy is what she is. Cowardly, selfish, mean to the last!' Guy went on, walking up and down the room speaking of Sir Henry. 'He let his poor young wife know every bitterness that poverty and undeserved shame could bring her. I asked her if he had made no provision for her, given her nothing. "Money from time to time—a little for the children, and her wages regularly; — from Evans too!—and these," she said, showing me her ring and a diamond guard-ring hanging round her neck on a black ribbon.'

"I asked Guy what had induced her to marry him? 'Pity, I take it, as she implied in her short story. I wonder what the children may be like? That young Sir Harry!' It seems too dreadful that that boy should rob my Guy," Mrs. Vernon said, ready to cry as she spoke. "Guy comforted me. He said I was always strong when there was trouble, only nervous in manner. You know, dear Mrs. Burleigh, I always seemed to know what was right, though I could seldom do it in Mr. Vernon's lifetime. I have seen strong and clever women turn sick and incapable with fright or trouble. I do not; fear seems to give me strength, or I forget how weak I am. I told Guy I would help him with all my heart. If self-denial and economy of mine could repay what he had taken, it should soon be repaid. 'Thank God for giving me such a mother!' my boy said. I should help him, and that poor young thing; she is only five-

and twenty. A friend had once advised him to *turn to* as working bailiff at The Chase, Guy said: 'I might do worse now.' He sent his love to you both, and bid me tell Madge 'Whatever is, is right.' He was afraid of your fancying him crushed by his troubles, but he is gone, full of courage, to help repair that woman's wrongs. God bless him!"

* * * * *

To tell how the two ladies at Pendrills sympathised with their dear friend, is needless. Probably, that morning, there were more kisses and fond words exchanged between them than in all their neighbourly lives before; for many were meant for the young giant, who was so nobly bent on restoring the honour of his family at the cost of all his present possessions.

But there was much left in the human nature of Rippleford not dreamt of in Mrs. Blight's

philosophy; and probably the greatest sufferers by the "great Vernon scandal" were Mrs. Blight herself, and her bosom friend Mrs. MacBeggah Tweedy, both of whom found it impossible to believe anything but the worst of all concerned.

"But I must tell you of a ridiculous trouble of my own," Mrs. Vernon said later, when the first outburst of sympathy and admiration for Guy had calmed down a little. "You know how difficult my maid Pearce is to please. She was furious last night at my taking that poor young thing up to my room. She would not prepare a bed for her, answering my wish to have one made ready, as if she was going to be sick, before Lucy, too. 'For her, ma'am? Where shall I prepare a bed for *her?*' So I said boldly, 'In my dressing-room. On the great sofa, where I slept when Mr. Vernon was ill.' And this

morning she told me, if she was expected to wait on creatures like Miss Lucy Fellowes, she thought she had better leave at once, in a week; and I said certainly, she might leave in a week."

"Dear Mrs. Vernon, she did not mean it."

"No, Madge, dear, but *I* did," the gentle old lady continued; "you know Pearce is only kind to me when I am sick, four or five days out of the year at most, I have such excellent health; all the rest of the time I suffer from her temper and tyrannical ways. Her good qualities hardly make up for her unpleasant nature. Still I shall feel quite nervous with such a frozen, silent woman beside me for a whole week."

"Come and stay with us," said Mrs. Burleigh and her daughter with one voice.

"After such a shock as you have had, a little change will do you good; do come to us," Mrs. Burleigh urged.

"No, dear friends. The other servants must not think I am a coward. They have all suffered so much from Pearce's tyranny, they will help me cordially till she goes. But it pains me, that after nine years' kindness and forbearance I must let her go."

"Let me go home and stay with you," Madge begged; "you will want some one to talk to of Guy and poor Lucy."

"My dear, if your dear mother will spare you, how grateful I shall be. But, Madge dear, when I am slow and confused don't tell me not to stop and think. It is all very well for you to run on without thinking. I cannot. I would give worlds if I could."

"Forgive me, dear Mrs. Vernon," Madge said coaxingly, putting up her face to receive the ready kiss of peace. "I will try to be a comfort to you. Oh! how glad I am you did not turn Guy out as they told mamma."

"Turn my boy out? What for?"

"For marrying secretly."

"What a shameful thing to say! My own dear boy! I would not mind if he had married fifty women secretly! Mrs. Blight must have invented that story. I wish you could have seen Guy this morning. He was like a new man. Brave, decided, and so kind to poor Lucy and to me! I thought as they drove away, I had never seen him look so handsome, all his goodness was beaming out of his dear eyes. My own boy!"

CHAPTER X.

WHO WAS MOST TO BE PITIED OF ALL.

"Let our just censures
Attend the true event."

SHAKESPEARE.

ON kind Mrs. Loraine and Sibyl the news had fallen like a thunderbolt. Mrs. Loraine wept as she thought of the two loving mothers whose happiness had been bound up in Guy Vernon's welfare and honour. And Sibyl sat silent and scared again with distress. At last she spoke :

"Mamma, let us go to Pendrills. It will kill Madge. She loved him, I know she did —dearly !"

"No, darling. It is like having his death to mourn. We must not ask to see them till the first agony is over. Who could have believed anything wrong of honest-hearted Guy! The wife must be a dreadful woman if she has warped him so. My dear, dear friends, how I feel for you all."

But Sibyl soon had a note from Madge to set her mind comparatively at rest.

"DEAREST SIBYL," the pencil scribble ran,

"I am off to The Cedars to spend a week with dear Mrs. Vernon, till she can get rid of Pearce, who has behaved shamefully. We tried to persuade her to come to us, but she prefers to remain at home, and takes me with her. Dear old Guy has behaved splendidly; of course his mother is miserable, but is half-reconciled to the loss of fortune already, and thinks the poor widow the only person to pity just now. Do go and sit an hour or

two with mamma, she will miss me so. And then come and see your loving

"MADGE."

Upon receipt of this note, Sibyl put on her old garden hat and swung a cloak over her shoulders, and prepared for a run.

"I am going to demand satisfaction of Mrs. Burleigh, ducky! I will leave you Madge's hieroglyphics, and if you can manage to make out *how* Pearce and Guy and the poor widow have lost *what* fortune, and why Guy's splendid behaviour makes his mother miserable, you shall tell your version, when I tell mine of this great Vernon mystery, on my return."

And away she flew—through the American garden, and out by the side-gate opposite the keeper's lodge at Pendrills, and across the wet grass, the shortest cut she could take over the glittering gossamer-covered meadows, to the

house, saving every fraction of road and time.

And Mrs. Burleigh was only too happy to tell the whole story to Sibyl, and to see the brimming eyes with which the tender-hearted girl listened to the story of Guy's wrongs, and his dear, gentle mother's unselfishness.

Madge was not mentioned, but Sibyl's kisses on leaving were full of unspoken sympathy, Mrs. Burleigh thought; and something came straight from her motherly heart to answer it.

"My dear, the suspense was very short. Madge is quite well and quite happy."

And Sibyl sang softly to herself as she tripped home again, and was looking as bright as beauty and loving kindness together could make her, when she came suddenly upon Mr. Traill and Sir Augustus Vansittart in the American garden.

"The fairies are abroad," said gallant Mr.

Traill. "We have just seen Miss Burleigh disappear into Mrs. Vernon's porch."

"Have you heard the great news?" Sibyl asked eagerly; "because if you have, disbelieve it all; that is, believe nothing but what is noble and manly of Guy Vernon and his mother, and Sir Henry's victim and widow."

"Hoighty toighty!" said Mr. Traill. "Here's a pretty coil! We have heard nothing. We are ready to believe every word you will tell us implicitly, as if you were Mrs. Blight; but begin, an' it please you, from the beginning, not at the end, Miss Loraine."

"I cry you mercy," Sibyl said, laughing. "I must refer you to Mrs. Blight, the story is so incredible; and then I have only to beg you to disbelieve all you hear. I have wet boots on, and have left mamma suffering from an acute attack of curiosity. I must hasten home to cure her, and change my shoes."

"Pray do," Sir Augustus said, opening his lips for the first time. "Your boots are only fit for dancing in, and you seem to have been all through the wet grass. Women are insane, I do think, as regards boots generally."

"I was in a fright when I left home. Or I should not have forgotten I had pet boots on. Good-morning."

"I wonder what she is so excited about," Mr. Traill said, as he watched her swift retreat to the house.

"There has been the devil's own row this morning over some scandal regarding Guy Vernon. I have ordered no one should speak to me of it. I should be the last person to believe any scandals got up in Rippleford. They have trumped up some infernal lie about his having made a low marriage and concealed his wife. You don't mean to say you have not heard it, living next door as you do?"

"I have heard nothing till now," Mr. Traill said gravely.

The words his friend had spoken pained him exceedingly. He did not suffer from the prudish delicacy of hearing most distinctly what is best left unheard. But the tone in which the obnoxious words were uttered,—the harsh, hoarse tones of suffering from a wrong unforgotten, and unforgiven still—pained him exceedingly.

Mr. Traill asked no more, but went later to lunch with Mrs. Loraine, and asked and heard from her all that Mrs. Burleigh had told of Mrs. Vernon's story.

And by evening Guy Vernon's fame had passed from under the cloud, and was shining serene and bright as the glorious autumn moon, that shed its mellow light upon all the great features of the home scenes of Rippleford, and cast all baser things into their fitting shade.

The two persons most to be pitied by their neighbours, by the time night closed in upon them, were Mrs. Blight and Mrs. MacBeggah Tweedy, both of whom found it impossible to believe anything but the worst of Guy Vernon, and the poor widow whose cause he had taken under his protection.

Lady Vansittart had cordially joined her son in smothering the blaze of curiosity at the Manor. She felt it unnatural to believe so foul a stain could attach itself to a neighbour to whom she had granted a sort of equality with herself! Perhaps a suspicion of Mrs. Vernon's misery may have crossed her mind. She might even have felt for her own son in his trouble, though she gave no sign. There was a granite grandeur about Lady Vansittart, that hid all expression of her feelings, and baffled all attempts to discover what they might be.

Sir Augustus, as he took his candle from a

side-table, and prepared to retire to his pipe and his bull-terrier pups for the night, told his mother in his own brusque way:

"Vernon, it seems, is as clear as the sun. That old scamp, Sir Henry, married his dairy-maid, and left her to right herself and his two boys as best she could, by bringing her marriage certificate to his supposed heir. That is the long and the short of this morning's row, ma'am. Vernon has taken charge of the poor woman. She can't have a better friend. Of course this is ruin to his prospects. I wish to Heaven one could help him. A nobler fellow never lived. Good-night, ma'am."

"Good-night, Augustus. I am glad it is all cleared up in a satisfactory manner, for many reasons. *Noblesse oblige.*"

CHAPTER XI.

PUT TO THE PROOF.

"So may'st thou watch me where I weep,
As unto vaster motions bound,
The circuits of thine orbit round
A higher height, a deeper deep."

TENNYSON (*In Memoriam*).

IT was impossible for Mrs. Vernon to keep from dwelling on Guy's wrongs and griefs to Madge Burleigh; even while she felt that Madge, of all people in the world, should not be her confidant. And until they parted for the night, the only topic of their conversation was noble-hearted Guy.

"Oh, Madge, child! I know how wrong

it was, but when he told me that you said, you might have loved The Chase, but never my son himself, I hated you; and he said, 'Never blame her, mother; her truth has saved us both.' I told him in my despair I wished I was dead, that he might enjoy at once what little property of his father's there is. And he put his arms round me and kissed me—you know how seldom he does such things, Madge: how he hates scenes, as he calls them—kissed my hair and my eyes, and said to me, 'Think what I should be now without you, mother. I feel as if I had been shipwrecked on a strange, uninhabited shore. Thank God! I find I have one fellow-creature near me to love and trust in still.' I cannot remember all his words, Madge—they were strong and clear—I only remember the pain of them, and how, at the worst, when his hands were as cold as any troubled woman's, he still thought of you and poor Lucy—never of himself. He

thanked God you were not trapped, as he called it; and thought of all we could do to uphold and secure her from harm, for her own sake, and for the honour of the family."

* * * * *

"Dear Mrs. Vernon," Madge whispered, as her old friend kissed her good-night in the dainty "daisy" bedroom prepared for her by melting Pearce, "do you think Guy will ever forgive me?"

"First and last he thought of you, Madge, without any bitterness, child; but we are glad now that you could not love him as he loved you. He and I can bear the trouble together —nobody can come between us now, my dear, not even you."

Mrs. Vernon was growing jealous of him in his trouble; jealous of him for the first time in her life since, as an infant, he had been transferred from herself to a hired nurse. In his danger and dependence on her

he had again suddenly become endowed with the tender charm of infancy to his mother, and the old time and the old pain came back to her memory vividly.

"But you are a dear good girl to be so tender to me now we are in trouble. You have always been very true and very disinterested, Madge, and that is why I wanted you to be Guy's wife; but now he is glad, and so am I, that he is free."

And again she kissed Madge, and left her to Pearce, who came to ask in tones of tender supplication if she might unpack for her, or undress her, or brush her beautiful hair, or do anything in the world for her?

But Miss Burleigh declined all assistance, with gentle thanks. She would be alone. Alone, to think over Mrs. Vernon's narrative. Every word of it had seemed to stab Madge's tender heart, as all she herself had said to noble Guy seemed to have stabbed him. How

cruel she had been, how arrogant, how proud and ungrateful in return for his unfailing devotion!

The shock of the morning's news had been far greater than any one supposed; and now that the stillness and isolation of the daisy guest-chamber seemed to cut her off from all human sympathy, the destruction of all her self-delusions and coy hopes appalled her.

It was in a passion of self-reproach and remorse that poor mistaken Madge Burleigh fell upon her knees that night, and prayed as she had never prayed before.

Hearts, like spices, must be bruised, if not crushed, before they yield their fullest tribute. We are but human, and many of us need a red-hot iron of personal suffering to sear the corroding canker of self-deluding selfishness that eats into our souls. When we are sincere, we say this of our neighbours; when we are hypocritical, we say it of our-

selves; but from time to time the flood-gates of our conscience give way before the torrent of sorrowful remorse that overwhelms. and—we would fain hope—purifies us in its course.

Our most earnest prayers are not those we carry to church, ready made for us, on the leaves of our dainty Church Service, to be repeated with sadly wandering hearts within the sacred edifice, in sight of our critical neighbours. And beautiful as some portions of our liturgy are, they fail to touch the canker we have dared to hint at, until the red-hot iron has laid it bare and made it tender. Until a nation passes through a revolution, as appalling as that of the Indian Mutiny—and not only its strong men, but its tender women and babes are in the destroyer's power—it does not bow its head and throb an universal prayer to God to deliver it from "battle and murder and from sudden death."

Until our sons leave us on perilous expeditions, we do not beseech in special humility that "all that travel by land or water," may be "preserved."

Until we watch our darling in her day of agony, we do not lay our whole soul prostrate in supplication for "women labouring of child."

* * * * *

Madge Burleigh prayed as she had never prayed before. Sorrow, and pain, and love, and grievous fear of *loss* adding to her burden of self-accusing remorse.

To a middle-aged matron, in all the fulness of contented happiness, the girl's agony would seem ridiculous of course.

To a man, tired of all he may once have known under the ill-used name of love, such self-accusing remorse might come under the hard name of *humbug;* but Madge ever looked back to that day and night at The

Cedars as to the most wretched of all her life; and such hours of suffering are sacred.

Her fair young face was still wet with tears; her throat was still moved by spasms of irresistible sobs, when she had regained some portion of the peace that ever follows repentance, and strove to brace herself afresh for the future with good resolutions.

Madge had put out the lights the instant the door closed upon the officious Pearce. The moonlight streaming in upon her was almost more than she could bear. Now she sought the open window in striving to calm herself, and looked out upon the solemn cedars, stretching their dark branches above the tender summer mist, and at the moon, sailing, as it seemed, on a rippled sea of ether; and the cool, perfumed air from the almost invisible garden, and the gentle murmur of the Ripple beyond, helped to soothe her. The troubles of the day seemed to be

drifting away, even as the fleecy clouds she was watching. She was tired—oh, so tired, after the storm.

To Guy unconsciously her last thoughts were given, as she murmured: "Guy's now, whatever happens! for ever and ever. Amen!"

During her visit Madge heard nearly every word of Guy's letters to his mother. She heard all Lucy's history, and of the sick child's slow recovery. She became daily a greater comfort to Mrs. Vernon as a listener and confidant; for she never tired of listening and wishing to help, nor of sympathising with Guy's dear, timid, generous-hearted mother.

How eagerly, too, she waited for any proof of remembrance of her among the messages and directions sent for every one else connected with his old home; for he must have known she was there. But "I am glad, dearest mother, that you are not

alone," was all he said to prove he did know it.

"I could almost wish you had had my short experience, and knew how little happiness The Chase property brought me," he said in another letter. "You would soon reconcile yourself to having a bankrupt son."

The first letters brought the assurance that the marriage was beyond all doubt a legal one, and that the young Sir Harry was as fine a little fellow as Guy could wish at the head of his house.

"He is a sturdy, rosy, curly-pated young Hercules," Guy wrote. "He will never be afraid of anything, and will always tell the truth, he informed me to-day; and we have sworn an eternal friendship. I defy any one to resist such a child's fascination. I came prepared to think him a little clod, and here we are, inseparable companions; for his mother never quits my little withered name-

sake. It seems the poor child has pined nearly to death for her. You can almost see through him ; he is like wax."

Again he wrote : "Dr. Farse thinks she will save him. I never saw such untiring devotion. What a *brick* the woman is !"

In another letter : "Lucy Vernon and I have been pestered with applications and advice for the great struggle the pettifoggers of the law hope is coming on of Vernon *versus* Vernon *alias* Fellowes. How disconcerted they will all be to find that a friendly transfer is all that is thought of, and that under the protection of the High Court of Chancery."

The Rector of Lucy Vernon's parish and his wife had come forward, Guy reported, with their thorough and most friendly support. Indeed, it was Mrs. Boyd who undertook a clothing commission to outfit the Baronet's widow and children in a manner befitting their new circumstances. While

Lucy Fellowes's old Sunday class-mistress, now one of the reigning great ladies of the neighbourhood, and a very sweet young matron indeed, came forward once more with all the kindness of her girlish days, to teach her old pupil many little social dogmas harder than those she had striven to instil with the Catechism.

In bidding Lady Vernon good-bye, the social queen said:

"One of these days, and soon, I hope you will invite us to Vernon's Chase, that we may see your beautiful home, and all your new neighbours. To all the really nice people I will make myself very amiable, Lucy, and so will my spouse."

And the advent of such unexceptionably desirable acquaintances, coming as friends with good Dr. and Mrs. Boyd, struck Rippleford dumb with surprise, Mrs. Blight said. But at present we have only to chronicle

Guy's reports of all his doings and his experiences as they reached The Cedars, and Mrs. Blight's astonishment may find expression afterwards.

Later, on Mr. Vernon's return to London, the real difficulties of his reverse were made clear to him. There were pressing anxieties regarding the expenditure and alterations during his short possession of Vernon's Chase.

The children had to be made wards in Chancery, and a petition was then filed for a deed of release to exonerate Mr. Vernon from all debts, and dilapidations, and waste; for such were the terms applied to even his most obvious improvements.

But he was duly and honourably released, and all his doings as master of the property were accepted for the real heir. Mr. Vernon was then appointed joint guardian with Lady Vernon of the "infants," and at his pressing

request he was installed as working agent or steward for the little Baronet.

While, at Lady Vernon's pressing request, such a salary was awarded him as enabled him to leave his mother's income intact, while he devoted himself to the interest of her two friendless children and their possessions.

CHAPTER XII.

SIR AUGUSTUS BUYS THE PETS.

"In him inexplicably mix'd appear'd
Much to be loved and hated, sought and feared."
BYRON (*Lara*).

As soon as the legality of Sir Henry Vernon's marriage was proved, great reductions in the establishment at The Cedars were made. All Guy's horses and deerhounds were to be sold.

It was with a feeling of surprise and disgust the two ladies at The Cedars heard that Sir Augustus Vansittart had paid several visits to the stable-yard, and held long conversations with Guy's head groom regarding

the purchase of Feroza and Fatima, and all the dogs, and that he specially desired to prevent any mention of them in the *Lynn Advertiser* or the *Rootshire Chronicle.*

In fact Sir Augustus never rested till he got the whole of the animals made over to him at a valuation.

And when this was all settled he had the "cruelty" to ask to see Mrs. Vernon.

"Don't leave me, Madge dear? I am half afraid of that great, high-shouldered, dark-haired young man. If he is unkind about Guy, say some of your clever sharp things, darling, and make him go. Yes, show Sir Augustus Vansittart in, Graves."

But the Baronet was not unkind. He was only very awkward and abrupt.

"I dare say you are astonished to see me, Mrs. Vernon," he said. "I come on business. I want you to give or send a message from me to Sir Guy, that is, your son."

Mrs. Vernon only bowed, and Sir Augustus taking her shy dread for somethimg more of cool contempt than civility, stood up ready to take leave at once, and standing between the two ladies and the window of their little morning room, literally seemed to darken it by his presence.

"I have bought all his horses and dogs, as I dare say you know. He might have got more for them, very likely, if they had been put up at public auction. There would have been a sharp competition for them. But somehow I thought in his place I should rather a neighbour took them over without any row. Now, I want you to tell your son—for I am such a stupid fellow when I want to do a thing neatly I can't—I want you to tell him he needn't be afraid of my riding any of them. I shall just keep them until he is all right and likes to take them back; and I've engaged Ball and his under man to be with

them. They are to be pets. You know what a pet is, Miss Burleigh? A creature that eats, drinks, sleeps, and is admired as useless,—just like most young ladies in fact. If you will just tell your son this without hurting him, Mrs. Vernon, I shall be grateful to you. I shall go and see him later. I am sorry I had to come, for I know you would rather not have seen me. Good-morning."

Sir Augustus had moved to the door as he closed his speech, and was gone before Mrs. Vernon had recovered her astonishment.

"Indeed, indeed!" she cried nervously; "Madge, darling, run, fetch him back, thank him, do something, quick!"

And Madge followed as quick as kind thought, and found him still in the hall.

"Mrs. Vernon bid me follow you to thank you, Sir Augustus," she said, smiling and

blushing; "do come back and let her thank you herself. Guy will be so happy; after his mother, he loves Feroza and Fatima best of all created things."

"You think so, do you, Miss Burleigh? I don't. You are not looking well; you must have a trying time of it here, now, with his mother. It must be a very hard time for all who love Guy Vernon. Take care of yourself. Good-bye."

Madge went to her own room instead of going back to Mrs. Vernon.

What could he mean? What did he know? What did he guess of her secret? Something he must know, for his manner was even more kind and sympathetic than his words.

And a dawn of something very like trust in the unamiable, high-shouldered neighbour crept into her mind, and lit up many little incidents in their intercourse, and explained

many little attentions from which she had hitherto drawn back.

"How kindly he looked and spoke. I will beg Mrs. Vernon to ask him to lunch, that she may get used to him, and thank him herself. If he is so friendly to Guy she ought to know more of him, and strengthen this new tie between them both," Madge said to herself.

And later, the note was written, and the invitation accepted; and in due course, while the lunch was being eaten, Sir Augustus had strengthened the tie greatly, for he had expressed heartily his old boyish love for Guy, and his present strong sympathy in Guy's great reverse—"wishing to heaven he could help him," as he had already said to his own mother.

And Mrs. Vernon could now say with truth: "It was foolish to believe all Mrs. Blight said, merely because Sir Augustus was

so high-shouldered, and bit in his underlip till the black hairs stood out from it like bristles."

* * * * *

"*Did* you see the outrageous flirtation Miss Burleigh was carrying on with Sir Augustus Vansittart coming out of the churchyard to-day?" Mrs. Blight asked her friend Mrs. Tweedy the following Sabbath.

"No; but I saw her smiling to herself *in* church," answered that most devout lady, "I cannot help praying, as I watch her, that a judgment may not fall upon her for her vanity and her inattention to the Word."

"Well, *I* overheard her asking saucily after Sir Augustus's pets—the idle useless young ladies."

"*Really!* there is *no* limit to that girl's boldness."

"And then she said something I could not quite catch about writing to Mr. Vernon.

She is playing off one admirer against the other."

"What a world of sin and woe we live in," groaned the mother of the plain and unco' good daughters with no admirers at all. "It is full of evil. No one can yet fathom the deep gulf of deceitfulness we call a human heart."

"I think if any one can *I* can," Mrs. Blight asserted boastfully.

"I do wish Mr. Traill would let me choose a few texts for him. 'Charity thinketh no evil' indeed! That subject has been worn threadbare in that pulpit before now. It is not the sort of text to preach upon to a congregation of educated persons like ourselves, though it may do well enough for the poor. The whole sermon was as much as to say we are all to hold our tongues about the great Vernon scandal."

CHAPTER XIII.

AT THE CEDARS.

"This, this is all my choice, my cheer—
A mind content, a conscience clear."
SYLVESTER (*A Contented Mind*).

SOME weeks passed away without any exercise of Mrs. Blight's great powers of clairvoyance into the dregs of her neighbours' consciences.

After the great storm of the Vernon scandal had blown over, the calm was perfect and most enjoyable.

Mrs. Vernon's folly in selling off her carriages and determining to let her house was the first succeeding topic for the loud dis-

approbation of the oracle in the staring white house at the cross roads.

"It was the *last* thing any woman who respected her position as she ought would think of doing, if she asked *her* advice. It was tantamount to owning herself and her son ruined."

But Mrs. Vernon did not dream of asking any such advice. She frankly owned to her friends her object henceforth would be to save every penny she could for her "dear boy." And she was daily more and more touched by finding herself a sort of heroine among them.

The love and sympathy of her neighbours brought her a fulness of peace that indeed passed her hopeless neighbour Mrs. Blight's understanding; and her brooding love and pride in her noble-hearted son shone forth from her gentle face, and gave her a second summer of beauty.

Mrs. Vernon had lived in such strict retirement since her husband's death, after years of

submission to the tyranny of his rule, that no one knew what sort of soul was contained in her frail body. A sort of solemn *hush*, if not stupor, had gradually crept over the household at The Cedars.

Mrs. Vernon seemed to have been so long crushed that she was unable to realise there were pleasures in freedom. When Sir Henry's selfish younger brother preceded him to the vault at Longbourne, and left her the "life enjoyment" of the home and possessions saddened to her by the discontents and sufferings of his later years, she had no heart left for enjoyment of any kind.

The best rooms with garden views at The Cedars were never used; a little breakfast-room was Mrs. Vernon's resort in her son's long absences abroad, or at Vernon's Chase. She was to all intents and purposes a childless woman: her son belonged to the property, and was his uncle's heir and ward.

Year by year the *hush* over the household of the timid and lonely lady grew deeper and more complete, till her very canaries never dreamed of cheeping, much less singing, unless some visitors arrived; and then the notes were less real than suggestive of the dormant powers of the depressed little songsters. But now light and air, music, love and song had once again burst forth as living realities for Mrs. Vernon.

In her son's absence she received the ovations of Rootshire. Honours and loving sympathy were lavished on her, and her house was gayer than it had been for years.

"Such a precious sight of company kept a-coming, it was more like a wedding than being *disconcerted* of your property," Graves, the old butler, asserted; and it ended by his having to remain in waiting among the flowers in the hall, and the great gates having to be fixed open.

Madge Burleigh and Miss Loraine were constantly beside the gentle old lady while guests were so frequent. They felt instinctively she must not be tired out with all the talking, and must have sympathetic listeners when her full heart needed to pour out its love for her "noble boy."

The fair maids of honour opened a sort of court in the drawing-rooms at The Cedars for her, and surrounded her with bright influences. Never had the flowers she delighted in been so lavishly displayed, or more artistically arranged; never had the perfumes wafted through the house been more subtle or more delicious, than from the rare plants with which even the gardener strove to show his reverence for his beloved mistress.

Every one was so kind. Even Sir Augustus Vansittart came again and again now and chatted with her.

"He is one of the best informed men I

know, my dears," she would tell her maids of honour. "He has seen so much, and makes such original remarks on all he has seen. I think he shows a very good heart in coming to talk so much and so pleasantly with an old lady like myself."

"But you are one of Rootshire's bravest and best, dear Mrs. Vernon," Sibyl Loraine answered, smiling. "You never let people know till now, how much they should love you."

Guy's Irish deerhounds once more sought their favourite mats in her hall, and waited patiently for their new master, each with a glove or a stick of the disinherited master of The Chase, to keep alive their allegiance and fidelity.

"If you think she likes to see us," Sir Augustus had said to Madge Burleigh, "we will come; but mind you tell me if she frets about them."

And Madge had been glad to tell him what pleasure *his* kind visits and the *dogs'* had given.

"All right," the high-shouldered gentleman had answered, with one of his rare smiles; and he had departed with the resolution to come again, and often.

How could he tell that Mrs. Blight was weaving a tissue of unkindly suspicions from his visits and his motives that well-nigh broke Guy's heart?

CHAPTER XIV.

"IT MUST NOT BE, MOTHER."

"O welcome guest, though unexpected here."
COWPER (*To his Mother's Picture*).

SLEEKO, the Zulu convert, recommended to Captain Carteret's benevolence by Miss Jane MacBeggah Tweedy at Lady Vansittart's great garden-party, was one of those curious foreign objects that the great wave of proselytism triumphantly brings to shore from time to time. Such a specimen is eagerly seized upon and exhibited, to prove that missions in foreign parts are working zealously, and are worthy of untiring and liberal support.

One such eloquent savage is counted as a little fortune to its consignees, and generally brings in more than fifty sermons for any well-known hospital fund.

Mrs. MacBeggah Tweedy felt that she was indeed "blessed" by Sleeko's consenting to make her doleful home the "tabernacle" of his unexpected stay in Rippleford. He could give her only one night and one day, he told her; but he promised to make the most of that time, and would lecture upon the necessities and spiritual darkness of his tribe to all the friends of "the work" Mrs. Tweedy could bring together.

All the birds of Mrs. Tweedy's own dismal feather flocked together at the tea-party she gave in honour of his arrival, and the great black swan made his first appearance to a highly sympathetic audience, in the drab drawing-room of The Evergreens.

About midnight, Mr. Traill, in passing

from the bedside of a dying parishioner, heard the discordant wailing of what Mrs. Tweedy was pleased to call "a song of praise" oozing through her closed shutters.

The weary flymen waiting outside for the benighted guests, did not approve of the beerless re-unions at Mrs. Tweedy's, and vented their chilly wrath to their pastor and friend, as he hurried home, in one short but expressive sentence: "The rummiest lot ever you see, sir, are *at it* inside there."

Mr. Traill had been so nearly driven wild under the persecuting zeal of the believers in Sleeko, that he had begged Mrs. Burleigh to allow the "saint" to give his great lecture in her music-roon next day. And sooner than be unneighbourly, sooner than refuse Mr. Traill, sooner than that the still feeble schoolmaster Bates should have the anxiety and fatigue of such a meeting in his schoolroom, Mrs. Burleigh consented to let the lecture be given at

Pendrills, and was even now repenting heartily, while her lovely room was being turned topsy-turvy, and filled with school-forms and all the chairs available from all her spare rooms, upstairs and down.

Mrs. Burleigh's friends did not like to leave her alone to the tender mercies of the Zulu and his followers. We know how carefully she had hitherto kept aloof from Mrs. Tweedy's acquaintance, and that Mrs. Tweedy should now be forced upon her as a guest, as the patroness of the great Hottentot, was one of the most pressing reasons for Mrs. Burleigh's repentance. But her friends were to gather round her in great force, and a brisk sale of half-crown tickets might be depended on.

Tormented by a host of unpleasant perplexities and anxiety for the comfort of guests coming from a distance, Mrs. Burleigh had arranged to give luncheon to all who might

desire it, to make up to the purchasers of tickets for having to buy an entrance to her otherwise hospitable house.

In fact every step in the incongruous proceedings was a mistake, and was felt by Mrs. Burleigh to be so, and by Mr. Traill to be his fault; so the Vicar went to and fro between Pendrills and the church, driven by a vague but ceaseless remorse, wishing Sleeko and Mrs. Tweedy at the bottom of the sea.

In the midst of their preparations the ladies of Pendrills were suddenly surprised by the arrival of Mr. and Mrs. Douglas Burleigh and their two eldest children, Leo and Teresa.

No notice had been sent of their coming, and the usual pleasant commotion that attends the arrival of dear and unexpected visitors thrilled through Pendrills from attic to cellar.

The elders talked over every little change in Mrs. Burleigh and Madge's looks, and

every little re-arrangement of the pleasant morning-room, as if they had been from home for years; while the children chased upstairs and down in an ecstasy of liberty, and exchanged hearty greetings with their household friends, and were so complimented on their growth and good looks, that they became just a wee bit saucy and unruly.

"You have not told us yet what brought you here so suddenly," Mrs. Burleigh said in her soft, loving voice. "Is it *your* surprise, Douglas, or dear Teresa's?"

As she spoke Mr. Burleigh opened the door from the morning-room to the music-room, and we have no reply of his to report. He was struck dumb by what he saw there. The change was indeed startling.

Usually, the great drawing-room, or music-room as it was more often called, was never to be sufficiently admired. The superb proportions struck you with amazement, before you

could take in all the comfort and beauty of the room.

At the extreme end, opposite the great fire-place, folding glass-doors opened into a brilliant conservatory, in which all Mrs. Burleigh's favourite plants were growing in luxuriant beauty and almost reckless strength; their wildness and lavish wealth of blossoms being sources of special delight to her.

Rare climbing plants flung their bright garlands from the roof, to mingle with the blossoms of the trees or plants below. Jasmines and roses, heliotropes and geraniums, acquired in Mrs. Burleigh's conservatory a size and beauty unknown in those of her neighbours, and helped to form in it an almost tropical jungle of sweetness and luxuriance.

On one side of the room five large windows overlooked the garden and the park glades beyond. The centre one led down by wide steps to a broad, low terrace, on which, in summer-

time, great carved stone troughs and vases were always overflowing with fragrant wealth of old-fashioned flowers. The other four deeply-recessed windows were fitted with cosy, low sofas that enticed one to rest, and rejoice in the lovely garden and views beyond.

On the opposite side of the room were wonderful, old ebony cabinets, filled with precious old china; and on the wall hung some priceless "Sir Joshuas" and "Gainsboroughs" of the beauties and heiresses who had long since passed away from their beloved Pendrills; though they still *seemed* to be watching with tender interest their bewitching descendant Margaret Burleigh, whose piano occupied the centre of the room, surrounded with stands of many and well-worn volumes of music, to bear record of her loving study of many masters.

The wide hearth of the magnificent room was a hospitable hearth, with a fire always burning on it. Though in summer every door

and window might be open, and the sound of the bees in the fragrant lime avenue in the park might lull you as you sat, there were always glowing logs burning on the quaint old dragon-headed andirons in the music-room at Pendrills.

The whole colouring of the room was soft and harmonious, for no modern carpets or covers were allowed to clash with its old Beauvais-tapestry curtains and furniture; nor to contrast the vulgar gaudy richness of modern manufacturers with their time-honoured, and somewhat faded garlands of roses and poppies, surrounding illustrations of Æsop's fables.

But *now*, how changed was all this! The china cabinets, the carved ebony chairs with the old tapestry, the piano, the treasures of every-day life were no longer there. Row beyond row of school-benches and mean wooden chairs hid the glory of the old polished

oak floor; and the noble music-room had the dismal and starved look of a Dissenters' meeting-house.

No wonder Mr. Burleigh's surprise prevented him from answering his mother; no wonder, when he *did* speak, it should be to exclaim, in a tone of imploring horror: "Good heavens, mother! what is the meaning of all I see there?"

And so the story of the next day's lecture had to be told; and badly enough it sounded, echoing in a vexatious way from among the school-benches in the outraged music-room.

"How much will buy off Mrs. Tweedy and her woolly scamp?" asked Mr. Burleigh in an angry voice, as the whole scheme bared itself before him. "Ten, twenty, thirty pounds! Something must be done, and at once. Sell half-crown tickets at your door, and lunch here afterwards!"

"I give luncheon, Douglas, because I felt really ashamed people should come so far and pay for coming in."

"Ashamed, I should think so! You will have the Paget here with her crew; boasting afterwards they have lunched with you and Madge! It must not be, mother. Teresa, tell my mother it must not be!"

"Forgive me that I speak at all, dear mother," Teresa said in her pretty foreign tones, kissing Mrs. Burleigh's hand in her pretty foreign way. "I think our mother must do in her own house her own way, my Douglas. But will Madge not go away if she must not see what you call Paget? That is an easy way, is it not?"

"My word is given," Mrs. Burleigh said gently. "Disagreeable as it all is, and painful as your anger is, my son, I must not break my word."

"I knew how it would be as soon as I left Pendrills," Mr. Burleigh said gloomily; "I thought Guy would be here to keep you womenfolk straight. You do 'play such fantastic tricks before high heaven.' By Jove! it makes me so angry! I'll go away."

"Do," said his wife, looking up to him with a beaming smile, "and come back when you are again kind, and good to help us." Mr. Burleigh went off fuming. "You have a thousand things to do, my mother, is it not so? Let me help."

"Teresa, my child, how unreasonable Douglas is. Does your mother spoil him? How do you manage him when he flies out in this way?"

"I lets him fly," said Teresa, laughing. "When he is very bad, and love does not remedy him, I put my little last baby with white robes on his knees. He must take

care then. He grows happy again. He is so good, so good! He knows I cannot never fear him. So I manages him always. It is good he is so big, and what you say magnanimous, the little men is wicked. You laugh at my English words. It is wrong always when I come back from Cousin Aurora in Spain. I shall speak soon well again with mamma and the children."

And so Teresa prattled, and cheered the disconcerted Mrs. Burleigh, and showed how the room could be made to hold quite as many persons, without looking quite so like a dissenters' meeting-house.

She arranged where flowers might stand; and small tables might break the lines of numberless chairs, and one or two sofas should make corners for old guests; for so far from wishing that every one should feel the meeting was a bore, Teresa was

bent on making an elegant welcome from Mrs. Burleigh appear through every detail.

How the sweet, bright-eyed, sparkling, little Spanish lady worked, and smoothed away the difficulties, and altered the appearance of the music-room! How different it all seemed when Mr. Burleigh came back and found the conservatory doors thrown open, and the whole air laden with perfume of heliotrope and roses; and how her great husband approved of all she had done, and ended by believing it was partly at his instigation,—so thoroughly did he identify himself with her ready wit, and practical common sense and sunshiny sympathy,—we leave our lady readers to imagine. They have all, no doubt, at some time or other of their lives had reason to admire the quickness of mankind to take credit for an idea they have energetically opposed, till, in spite of them it

became a success, and to plume themselves on the success they could not see until they grasped it, as their very own! It is a way the best husbands have; and Mr. Burleigh was not wanting in any of their attributes.

He did his best, too, to soothe the agitation of Mr. Traill's mind when he confessed his uneasiness.

"I have not the faintest idea," he owned, "of the sort of creature that Mrs. Tweedy's friends may have sent to her. I wonder I did not hear something of him from my old friend Verity, in Natal, if the man is so important a convert, and so trusted by his Mission. He writes to me from time to time, and would surely have written now, if this Sleeko had been all he pretends to be."

"I'm not so sure of that," Mr. Burleigh said; "I've heard that the various missions abroad are as full of petty jealousies as a

boarding-school for young ladies; or a country parish where the Vicar is young, rich, and unmarried!"

CHAPTER XV.

SLEEKO.

"None knew nor how, nor why, but he entwined
Himself perforce around the hearer's mind."

BYRON (*Lara*).

MADGE BURLEIGH, though longing intensely to know all that went on at Pendrills, virtuously took her way at twelve o'clock to The Beeches, and passed some time with merry Sibyl Loraine in wishing all sorts of ridiculous and improbable *contretems* to enliven the meeting.

When once Douglas Burleigh had recovered from his surprise and displeasure, he was ready to act as his mother's right hand.

He gave her his heartiest support, and carried her triumphantly over the mistakes of the day. Even when the Paget and another vixen took places in the centre of the room, —as unrivalled in their Parisian dresses as in brazen contentment at being there to flout the neighbours, who would hold no further acquaintance with them,—Mr. Burleigh found a moment to direct his mother's attention to Teresa and his children, grouped together among the large party arriving from Lynn, in which handsome Colonel Meredith, and his favourites, Carteret, Crawford Ffrancks, and Willoughby towered in full force.

There was no trace of the dissenting meeting-house about the music-room now. Mrs. Burleigh's friends had gathered gallantly round her, and bright dresses, and cheery greetings, and glad welcomes gave it the air of an "at home" instead.

Sleeko came to Rippleford armed with

letters from undoubted friends of the American Mission at Natal, and made his way rapidly to Mrs. MacBeggah Tweedy's heart by his glib repetition of the needful Shibboleth.

Mr. Traill having little or no opinion of her judgment, or true Christian charity, would gladly have seen the Zulu missionary, before introducing him to Mrs. Burleigh at Pendrills. But we know he had been called away to comfort and minister to a dying parishioner, and so had lost the opportunity of hearing his address to Mrs. Tweedy's tea-party: as, indeed, he had told Mr. Burleigh.

Mr. Traill's differences with Mrs. Tweedy, regarding his management of the parish, had been made up too recently to inspire him with any desire to break through the ceremonious terms, they were now on, by an early visit, even make acquaintance with her savage *protégé*. He had a holy horror of his irritating neigh-

bour; and if we have succeeded in giving our readers a fair idea of the dear good Vicar of Rippleford, we need not tell them how easily he persuaded himself that it was now impossible to take active measures in opposition to her wishes. He tried to convince himself "that it was best *now* to let things take their course," and to make Sleeko's acquaintance with Mrs. Burleigh's other friends gathered round her at Pendrills.

The great music-room was full to overflowing. Every door and window, too, held a group of eager gazers, beyond them, on the tip-toe of expectation, as the great Zulu missionary made his appearance through the great conservatory doors, and came into the midst of the crowd.

He slowly unfolded from his great camel's-hair blanket, and stood before the audience in a well-cut European dress; and, with much quiet self-possession, rubbed up the tufts

and screws of wool upon his pate before he spoke.

He was a tall man, well-formed, erect and almost fierce in his bearing; certainly confident of success, and well pleased with his notoriety. This being so evident, there was less to grieve his hostess in the scream of dismay that burst from little Teresa Burleigh at the sight of him.

"Mamma! Dear mamma! Take me away! It is—it is the devil!"

"Nonsense, Teresa!" shouted her brave brother all across the room. They had been separated—lest together they should audibly criticise the proceedings. "Both his feet are as long and thin as Mr. Carey's!"

A determined effort was here made to remove the children; and Teresa's cries and her brother's remarks came fitfully muffled, or clear, and much intensified by indigna-

tion, as the children or their opponents were victorious.

"I *did* see a picture, Captain Ffrancks, and one of the real devil's feet was in two, like a cow's. Papa said it was good for us to see all kinds of creatures, and not to be afraid. I *won't* go, then! Take that horrid lady away. Take Teresa, then. Yes, I will be quiet. Let Mr. Carteret hold me. I will, I will be quiet!"

Here the courageous Mr. Carteret became bail for the noisy Leo Burleigh, and Sleeko prepared to begin his address, or lecture, or appeal—whatever it might be called—amid the smiles, and frowns, and despair of the good, the better, and the best of his audience; the MacBeggah Tweedys and Mrs. Blight being among the best, of course; and they despaired of any happiness here or hereafter for the children of Douglas and Teresa Burleigh, after such a "truly disgraceful scene."

"What a jolly little rogue Leo is," whispered young Carteret to his friend Ffrancks. He kicked out at Mrs. Blight in a manner beyond all praise."

"Don't make a row, Carteret. I want to find out what makes all the women run after such beasts as Sleeko and Othello."

"There is no denying this is a first-rate specimen of the genus Homo," Carteret said. "I expected thick, blubberly, negro lips, and flattened nose; and the 'saint' would be my ideal of a proud Spaniard, if only he had hair instead of wool."

Captain Carteret was right. The Zulu before the exquisites of Lynn was a noble specimen of manhood, and the type of his features was far more Moorish than negro. But for the little tufts of wool, and the somewhat sad expression of his rich brown countenance, there was little to mark him of a race said to be inferior, and fast passing away

before the invading protection of European colonists.

Sleeko had the presence that one might believe had graced the Apostles—the dignity that one alone who has shared in the freedom and innocence of our first parents,—who has been naked and not ashamed,—can ever hope to equal. The simple majesty of manhood, the grandeur of perfect independence and savage simplicity, made itself felt through even the disguise of modern European clothes.

The saint began his appeal with a glowing description of the clear skies, the sunny land-locked bays, the fertile shores, and swelling mountain ranges of his beloved home, Natal.

He represented the remnants of his once all-powerful tribe, followers of the renowned King of the Amazulu, Moselikatze (see the graphic descriptions and startling illustrations of Harris's "South Africa"), as dusky angels,

the tribes with whom they differed in either opinions, tint, or interests, or something too terrible to describe to English hearers.

He dwelt very feelingly upon the nakedness, corporeal as well as spiritual, of his own beloved people, and sent a shudder through the hearts of all the ladies present as he pictured the charms of his dusky Zulu sisters, ruthlessly exposed to the climate and to the rude gaze of European eyes.

"If he goes on much longer like that the old Tweedy will give him up. Just look at her mild eyes!" Carteret whispered again to his friend; and the elegant Crawford muttered in reply:

"The beast! I should like to try if his hide would take another tanning when he has done!"

But Sleeko, finding himself on a wrong tack, and that an indescribable flutter and uneasiness followed his description of woman's

loveliness in his African paradise, had the tact to change his theme, and brought the hearts of his hearers back to him once more by an indignant protest against the wrongs of the women upon whose charms he found he must not dwell.

He flashed before his audience the iniquities of polygamy. He deplored the hard labour to which degraded woman was kept. He made all the men—just described as angels compared with other tribes—tyrants, all the women martyrs, all the children cherubs; and then, with much sudden gesticulation and noisy zeal, becoming more and more Zulu; less and less the calm and intelligent lecturer, he prayed for "*moneys* to build churches—simple Zulu churches of reeds and cow-dung—in which the voices of those poor, polygamous, naked wives and their cherub children might rise in supplication to the God of the English people" to remedy all their wants and woes.

And he, Sleeko, would be there in the midst, to teach them how to pray, and how to praise, and how to cry aloud the names of Burleigh, Tweedy, and Victoria!

This was an anticlimax, doubtless; but his pious hearers came to be moved, and were moved, and those who came out of curiosity only were gratified, too. The man excited an interest no one could deny any more than they could explain.

Coming thus single-handed to his work there was courage, at least, in the missionary before them; and a charm in his rich voice, and his commanding dignity. If he was not an honest and heroic envoy from his needy brethren, every one was ready to wish he might be.

Mrs. Burleigh was enthusiastically thanked for allowing the meeting to be held at Pendrills; and Mrs. Tweedy ate her lunch

with the air of a woman who feels that she is famous.

We are not able to tell the sum the Miss Tweedys took from their neighbours for the Zulu saint; but we must not omit to mention how completely the Zulu saint took them by surprise by following his patronesses round—before they had any inkling of his intention—with a large packet of his own photographs *en Zulu*—without a suspicion of European or any other clothing on him—by the sale of which he netted quite as much as they did.

The *ruse* was as barefaced as the photograph, and gave a vast amount of wicked delight to the young officers from Lynn, that they remember to this day as the crowning triumph of Sleeko's mission.

And Mrs. Tweedy's long-desired introduction to Mrs. Burleigh, and her triumphal entry into Pendrills, were effected by a Kaffir from the south coast of Africa, when every other

effort and tentative to secure her object had failed.

It was to Sibyl Loraine that this strange new combination of cause and effect first presented itself; and the little family party at Pendrills made merry over the message she sent them by Madge, to point the moral to them.

CHAPTER XVI.

MR. BURLEIGH CAME TO PUT THINGS STRAIGHT.

"Love is not love
Which alters when it alteration finds."
SHAKESPEARE (*Sonnet* cxvi.)

THE dreaded lecture was over, and well over; and Mrs. Burleigh could enjoy to her heart's content the delight of her dear ones' presence.

Mr. Burleigh told her he came to see if he could put things straight between Madge and Guy. "For a nobler fellow does not live," he assured Mrs. Burleigh.

Mrs. Burleigh had firm faith in her son's wisdom and generosity. Notwithstanding his occasional outspoken disapproval of her ma-

nagement at Pendrills, she counted him as one of the best and wisest of mankind, and to leave the problem of Madge's future in his brotherly hands would be to have it solved with prudence and tenderness.

The alteration in Guy's prospects troubled Mrs. Burleigh's mind not a little. "Guy would not marry now," she told herself. It was a blessing, as Mrs. Vernon had told them Guy had said, that his position had not been complicated by his marriage—a blessing that Madge had not been *trapped.*

Mrs. Burleigh did not try to analyse her feeling of relief as she thought, "Guy will not think of marrying now." She was not conscious of insincerity when she told her son, "Do what seems best."

It was, therefore, with his mother's full sanction that Douglas Burleigh prepared to cross-examine his coy sister; and, drawing her arm lovingly through his own, he took her

from his children and their wild play out in the garden, next morning, into the perfumed shade and quiet of the conservatory.

"Madge, my child," he said to her coaxingly, "I wish you would be frank with me."

He looked down earnestly at her bright face as he spoke.

"I will, Douglas. What about?"

"About Guy. Ah! see, you change colour and turn away at once. Is that frank?"

"Ask me any fair questions, and I will answer fairly," said Madge. "I call that frank; but I call surprises cruel."

"Now, Madge, am I cruel? I want only to help you and Guy if I can. My mother will tell you I came here solely for that purpose. If Guy's loss of property makes the hitch, it can be so far remedied as to make you both independent at once of good old Mrs. Vernon."

"Dear Douglas, I know how generous you

are, and thank you with all my heart; but it must not be. Far from helping Guy, he would perhaps never speak to me again if you made me an heiress."

"Neither you nor Guy will tell me what you wish," complained Mr. Burleigh; and we think such a purely disinterested meddler did deserve some fuller recognition of his generosity than the young folks he tried to help gave him. The fact was, the Burleighs were not as much astonished at large-hearted dealings with money as most of their neighbours might have been; and to have doubled his sister's fortune now, instead of waiting for her mother's death, would have been a satisfaction, not any astonishing Quixotism to the generous-hearted Douglas.

"Madge," he resumed, "have you any other fancy—I will not call it attachment—that keeps you from valuing Guy as he deserves? I know he loves you heartily."

"Guy has nothing to tell, brother; neither have I; but as for any other," Madge said, hesitating and blushing, "dear brother, I *will* tell you this much: *nothing would induce me to marry any one but Guy;* yet I believe Guy will never again think of me! You have often wished me to be an old maid. Now you will have your old-maid sister on your hands for ever, whether you wish it or not. "But let me be in peace," she added with a changed voice, Mr. Burleigh could not help noticing with pain; "and above all, never let Guy know what I have said. Let your dealings with him be as friend to friend—let me be forgotten. It is indeed best so."

Madge looked him frankly enough in the face now, as she raised her own to end their conversation with a kiss.

Mr. Burleigh saw that the girl's whole soul was in her face, and full of pain, struggling with her secret, whatever it might be; and

Mr. Burleigh himself felt so touched by her expression, and her unshed tears, that he kissed her again, and stroked her hair as she whispered:

"Tell Teresa, and then let it all be forgotten."

And so they parted silently; and little had been gained by Mr. Burleigh's attempt to put matters straight.

* * * * *

We believe that Douglas Burleigh was sorely tempted to repeat Madge's declaration to Guy shortly after, when he met him going wearily about the Law Courts in town, working hard for the widow and orphans that were to disinherit him, and make him a beggar.

We believe, indeed, that some comforting hints of Madge's loyal affection must have leaked out, for about that time Guy's correspondence took a decidedly lively turn.

He wrote many clever descriptions to his mother of his first meetings with Lady Vernon's old folks at home; of her father's disappointment with her for being a lady, and not only a great farmer's widow; and of her mother's indignation at the widow's mourning when it came; though she had made quite an outcry at Lucy's coming home without any to appear in on her arrival.

The way the two wrong-headed old people fought over the children, and the mother's right to them, seemed to have given Guy ample occasion to protect and befriend the puzzled, and harassed, and inexperienced Lucy Vernon.

CHAPTER XVII.

JAMES TEBBOTT'S SPOONS.

"An hypocrite with his mouth destroyeth his neighbour; but through knowledge shall the just be delivered."
—PROVERBS xi. 9.

SLEEKO'S enthusiastic friends had done their best to secure him a triumphant reception at Lynn after his short stay at Rippleford. Every available paling and unwatched wall had been placarded for many days with bright red letters, informing the public that the saint was to be expected among them. "Sleeko the Convert;" "Sleeko the Saint;" "Sleeko is coming;" "Sleeko is here;" but

sad to tell, very few of the curious public of Lynn ever had a chance of seeing him.

Owing to some unexplained offence taken by the pretty chambermaid of the Black Lion, soon after the saint had alighted there from Mrs. Tweedy's fly, the head waiter had been the next person to address him, and—he was seen no more!

This man owned frankly enough to his master that he had threatened to break every bone in the brown skin of the "hodious Ottentot," and "couldn't tolerate heathen ways along of young women;" and when the time came to usher the Kaffir Christian into the assembly-room, he was not to be found. He was not a savage for nothing, and he had escaped from the temptations and dangers to which his untutored soul was exposed at the Black Lion in Lynn, as cleverly as if little Teresa Burleigh's suspicion had been the fact.

We all thought we had heard the last of the Zulu convert, when the search for a valuable string of gold and amber beads—a gift of Guy Vernon's to Mrs. Burleigh—ended fruitlessly at Pendrills; and Mrs. Tweedy's unfortunate young footman, James Tebbott, was dismissed without a character for having lost three silver teaspoons and an extinguisher the day of the lecture in Mrs. Burleigh's great music-room.

James Tebbott's friends had ventured to say it was hard he should suffer for another man's sin; and they laid a load of suspicion on the "blackamoor" Mrs. Tweedy had taken such pious pride in presenting to her neighbours.

James Tebbott's family were poor benighted beings, who cared nothing for foreign converts, or the S. P. G. They believed firmly in James and his honesty, and that "if the spoons *were* in James's list, and *hadn't*

been took away, they'd be there still, and they should say it, and think it to their dying day."

Mr. Traill shared this belief, and sought to justify himself and James's family by following up the spoons and extinguisher into foreign lands. He wrote a moving letter to his old friend Mr. Verity, in Durban, begging him to watch for the return of the Zulu convert to his home, and to endeavour to recover the stolen property by means of bribes or rewards dear to the hearts of heathens generally. Strings of blue and red beads of great brilliancy, clasp-knives, or even a gun, might be offered if the missing silver spoons could be come at once more, and Tebbott's character with them.

In reality, the young man did not suffer in a worldly point of view from the suspicions cast upon him by Mrs. Tweedy. Mrs. Vernon's old butler, Graves, who had

trained him as a boy, entreated Lady Vernon to take him into her service, that he might earn himself a new character. The old man willingly stood security for him, and Lady Vernon "set great store by him," the neighbours said in their homely phrase, and gave him the key of one of her big oak plate-chests when she came to the Chase.

Notwithstanding all Lady Vernon's generous trust in the unfortunate victim of Mrs. Tweedy's suspicions, James fretted under them; and it was to him and his relations an infinite relief, when, some months later, Mr. Verity's answer from Natal arrived, from which we here venture to give some extracts:

"I have at last found your Zulu visitor, Sleeko! And found him in a condition to awaken a lively admiration for christian charity among his fellows, if, indeed, he has any fellows, for Sleeko is a supereminent rogue.

"He has cheated the large-hearted American missionaries, who reared and educated him, and overwhelmed him with benefits, as unblushingly as he cheated your Rippleford friends. Do not fancy you and they were his first victims; that would indeed be too mortifying! He is an adept at taking in.

"But since his return he has excited such intense envy and hatred among the unconverted of his own tribe, that I imagine his career may come before long to a cruel and tragic end.

"He is, even now, virtually an outcast from every persuasion. He is neither Kaffir nor Christian; and he is hated and distrusted by all who have any knowledge of his doings.

"He has launched forth recklessly in wives and cows since his return, with the proceeds of his English harvest. His huts

are many, his progeny will be numerous; his mode of living, that of a Sybarite among such savages. In fact, he is a disgrace to his tribe, and to the sanguine and benevolent men who hoped to make him a beacon to his fellows.

"I made a trip to Sleeko's village to see what could be done to recover Mrs. Tweedy's spoons. Your own confidence in their whereabouts gave me courage and determination; and arming myself with some fascinating red feathers, and some Algerian gilt-coin necklaces, I hoped to be as irresistible with Sleeko's wife as I should be severe with him.

"I was given to understand, by the wife he left among us while he visited England, that he was sick and far away. But, unless I am much mistaken, he was even then crawling between the huts to escape from my unwelcome visit. My servant, from a rising ground a little way off, saw more than I did

of the little settlement, and of Sleeko's escape. This chief, or rather first wife, was wearing a pair of his London trousers buttoned round her neck, and hanging down her back. Probably they were quite as comfortable thus to her as they had ever been to her husband.

"Her little son, a fine little Zulu of four or five years old, wore a flaming red velveteen waistcoat as an open paletôt, which became him immensely.

"Another of his women wore a dress-coat upon her back, with the sleeves brought forward and tied across her ample bosom. The child she held upon her hip was bringing its teeth through upon Mrs. Tweedy's extinguisher, as if it had been a fashionable coral; and the youngest bride, as I guessed her to be, wore round her neck Mrs. Burleigh's amber and gold rosary, and round her loins a shell and bead-work girdle,

adorned with the three teaspoons as pendants. Very pleased, indeed, the woolly belle was to show them to me. There was the familiar crest and motto,—the underjawed shark, with the adage 'Jusqu'à la fin' beneath it.

"But, after all, you must be content with my word for all this. None of these treasures could have been parted with for any reward whatsoever in Sleeko's absence, without exposing the poor women to his brutal displeasure. I trust Mrs. Tweedy will be content with the enclosed written assurance of James Tebbott's innocence, from me, and that you will find no difficulty in rehabilitating the man before his self-respect is crushed by long-endured suspicion.

"You may tell Mrs. Tweedy that it would cost more than it is worth to prosecute her *protégé*, but she may take Counsel's opinion, if she wishes to do real substantial justice to

James Tebbott's wrongs, and pay him whatever the penalty would be for defamation of character!

"And now, my dear old friend, I shall find it far more difficult to answer your enquiry regarding the progress of true belief among the Kaffirs. If I could fairly compare our work among these poor savages with your work among the rural poor of Rootshire, I am not at all sure that I need be disheartened. Good grows but slowly anywhere, and as we do not see quite as clearly as you can into the nature of the soil we are sowing, we may be forgiven if we do not crop it more judiciously, or gather more good grain.

"The so-called stubborn ignorance and prejudices of the poor heathen distress me less than the fact that men, calling themselves ministers or missionaries of Christ, enter our calling as a mere profession by

which to earn their daily bread. They bring to a Herculean labour but a lukewarm zeal and courage, if any.

"I hear that at home, too, in undertaking a cure, it is usual to ask 'How much the curacy or the living is worth?' not 'How much good can I do in such or such a parish?'

"If the Divinity came once more among us to teach self-denial, humility, charity, long-suffering, and devotion, and to expose hypocrisy, how many would He find ready to own and follow Him. I fear too many would cry again with the Jews, 'Away with him! Away with him!' The sorrows of Gethsemane at least would be repeated."

CHAPTER XVIII.

"SHE MIGHT HAVE BEEN A DUCHESS."

"Far chequering o'er the painted window plays
The unwonted fagot's hospitable blaze."

BYRON (*Lara*).

TOWARDS the end of January the Chase was once more inhabited. Large fires blazed in all the rooms, and every preparation was made for the family's return.

Mrs. Dorking and her minions were little more than dim memories now, so great had been the romance and the interests of the last few months following what Mrs. Blight

persisted in calling "the great Vernon scandal."

Gentle little Miss Ryles, and her portly and clerical-looking brother, had been in charge during all the arrangements with Chancery.

Guy's advice had been taken on all matters regarding the future placing of the new family, and he had gladly recommended these trustworthy people as managers of the household to his inexperienced friend Lady Vernon. And Guy, the disinherited, pale, determined, great-hearted Guy, re-entered his former possessions with his bright-eyed, curly-pated, manly little cousin riding triumphantly on his shoulder, that all might see the little master, and take their cue, if one was needed, from his own loyal devotion to the orphan heir.

A silent welcome was all that could now be given to the widow and her children;

but there was no lack of good-feeling in the crowd that had gathered at The Chase to receive the travellers on their arrival, and to drink the health of the young Sir Harry in the great hall.

There were many "Bless hims" uttered in simple admiration for Mr. Guy's honest heart, as well as for the child, who all declared "were as jolly a little man as any need wish to see!" And the gentle mother, carrying her sick child in her arms, and seeming to think of him alone as she came into her vast new possessions, touched the hearts of her old acquaintances, and drew their best sympathies towards her from the very moment she stepped from her carriage and came among them.

We must not underrate the efforts made by Guy to beat down regretful recollections of the past, and all it held for him. On the contrary, let us try to put ourselves in his

place, and understand some of the natural pangs that blanched his usually glowing face, and drew the muscles round his mouth to an expression of desperate sternness, and made his first greetings to his old retainers sound a little cold and hollow.

Lady Vernon felt instinctively for Guy's sorrows, and her first words to all who came to take her orders and acknowledge her rule were in loyal recognition of his loyal efforts.

"Let all be done here still as Mr. Vernon wishes. His advice guides me in all things."

Guy's was indeed a strange position. Perhaps the blow which had fallen upon him was somewhat broken by the closeness of all the deep interests so lately, *still*, as it were, his own. It was difficult to believe that a sudden separation from them all would have pained him less, at any rate.

There was a calm dignity in his bearing, a

protecting gentleness in his treatment of Lucy Vernon, and a hearty affection in his care of the children that drew the hearts and respect of all degrees of men towards him. Never was any regent more royally recognised than the deposed Sir Guy by the people, great and small, who watched his rule. And Guy Vernon's uncomplaining, courageous acceptation of his fate spoke as plainly as possible to all who could understand and appreciate him, of his true nobility of soul. He seemed to say with Tennyson's Prince,

> "I hold
> That it becomes no man to nurse despair,
> But in the teeth of clench'd antagonisms
> To follow up the worthiest till he die."

* * * * *

"Lady Vernon is one of the wonders of the neighbourhood," Mrs. Blight declared. "I am fairly puzzled by her. It must either be the most perfect cunning, or the most

astonishing simplicity on her part; but I *never* saw such self-possession. She never seems to think of herself. Nothing seems to surprise her. She seems to be for ever thinking of Mr. Vernon, or his mother, or her boys, or her guests. To see her pacing along those great terraces so quietly, or down the green rides in her rich mourning, no one would dream she was a low woman. She might be a duchess! If any one had told me she was, I could have believed it. She has such very fine hands too, and *such* a diamond hoop.

"If dabbling in milk and cream is so good for the skin, I wish you would learn to make butter, and make it at once, Eliza; for you are as freckled and spotted as any bird's egg."

"I think you see my freckles and spots clearer than any one else, mamma; and you know I hate to be told of them, and that is

why you drag me into your description of Lady Vernon."

"I tell you for your own good only, Eliza."

"It does not do me any good to be reminded of my own ugliness, for I can't help it, and you know I can't."

For once Eliza Blight had our entire sympathy, and we thought it hard her plain face should be made plainer by the pain of the maternal criticism.

But all Mrs. Blight said of Lady Vernon was true. No one could dream of saying she was *a low woman.* She had some rare gifts, not always bestowed on the womankind that reaches the high rung of the social ladder to which duchesses climb. She had innate purity of heart; feeling for others, with the rare tact never to obtrude that feeling at wrong moments. She had a singleness of purpose, a tender, grateful heart that instinctively led her to attach herself to the best about her.

The Norfolk friends who came to The Chase as her first guests, to meet Guy's mother, and, as it were, to establish the fact of Lady Vernon's entire worthiness to rule there as the widow of the late Sir Henry, were people of such acknowledged consequence, that their comings and goings were chronicled in the *Court Circular*.

Mrs. Blight's astonishment exceeded all bounds. It beat all she had ever read in a novel. She began to doubt if the dairymaid story was not a pure fiction.

"Of course she would marry again and soon."

And very soon a suspicion crossed Mrs. Blight's mind which made a great many things clear which had puzzled her before. Lady Vernon would marry the disinherited master of the Chase; they were always now together, and Mrs. Vernon had let her house, and had taken up her abode in one of the

loveliest rooms overlooking the green terrace; then the scene of Madge's stormy interview with Guy, and the two little boys were learning to treat her quite as a grandmother.

"What would Miss Burleigh say to that?" Mrs. Blight asked, and no one could reply.

CHAPTER XIX.

THE COURSE OF TRUE LOVE.

"Then to come, in spite of sorrow
And at my window bid good-morrow."

MILTON ("*L'Allegro*").

"And, to be plain,
I think there is not half a kiss to choose
Who loves another best."

SHAKESPEARE.

HER Majesty's 1st Flamingoes were soon to leave their favourite quarters at Lynn for another less favoured garrison town, and many were the sorrowful leave-takings forced upon the much-admired officers of Colonel Meredith's gallant corps.

They were giving their last ball before their departure, and all Rootshire was there, bravely striving, in its gayest attire, to mock the cruel grief of parting.

The Town Hall at Lynn literally blazed with lights. Its flowery welcome received the guests as they drove under the colonnade of the market place, and accompanied them with growing sweetness and brightness into the great dancing hall. The walls glittered with trophies of arms, and glowed with the silken glories of time-honoured, victorious standards. Never had Lynn looked upon a more gorgeous scene of hospitality, or felt prouder of the dazzling world of Rootshire beauties, as they unfolded their bright butterfly wings, and flew from the carriages into the vast vestibule and up the flower-decked staircase.

The whole scene was of fairy-like beauty and brilliancy, and the music was worthy of

Herr Dromflutze, the celebrated bandmaster of H. M. 1st Flamingoes.

All Rootshire was there. Even Guy Vernon came for a last appearance in the gay world before he whistled his team afield, or drilled turnips for Lady Vernon at The Chase.

The world was much puzzled by the accounts Mrs. Blight and others had given of the duties undertaken by the disinherited master for the new heir; but it was generally known that the Old Lodge was being prepared for Lady Vernon's bailiff, as if he was the most honoured member of the new family. And as he now stood, towering above a group of dazzling, scarlet exquisites, Madge Burleigh thought him one of the noblest-looking of the men present.

The tawny head carried itself more proudly than of yore; the sad face had gained in manly dignity since they last parted; there

was positive *grandeur* in the bearing and earnest expression of her rejected suitor. She now desired to say something tender to him, for the first time in her life, and did not know how she might draw near to him, or if near to him, how to begin.

Madge Burleigh had dressed herself in a soft, creamy, semi-transparent, white dress, brought to her by Mr. Vernon from Constantinople or Algiers, and treasured by her for some great occasion, which she now felt was close at hand. She had buds of Mr. Vernon's *Gloire de Dijon* roses, with sprays of their red bronze leaves in her hair, and on her bosom; and she sat in ambush behind Mrs. Burleigh, feeling sure he would come to speak to her mother, however bent he might be on not treating her any more as his old friend and playfellow. So she sat in ambush, refusing all invitations to dance, until it was supposed she waited for a first dance with Sir Augustus

Vansittart, who was sure to come late. His mother's gorgeous beauty was of the kind that required time to prepare.

Sibyl Loraine was already enjoying the "linked grace and harmony" of the "gay dance" to the utmost; and at every pause to rest she was besieged with petitions from would-be partners, or admirers eager to be introduced.

"What new fancy have you taken to-night, Madge? Are you not going to dance? It will look so strange if you go on making excuses. If you are tired we will go home early; but here comes Guy. Now do dance with Guy," Mrs. Burleigh said.

Madge pretended not to see him, for she felt quite oppressed with a secret she held, to be told to him alone, and to-night.

So Guy Vernon exchanged cordial greetings with Mrs. Burleigh, and smiles alone with Madge, until a whirling storm of tulle

and music obliged him to seek shelter from its waves, and Madge patted an empty place beside herself on the bench behind her mother, and where she had so patted he laughingly took refuge.

And as he settled himself he saw that Madge wore his creamy-white Algerian dress, and had his rosebuds on her gown, and in her hair; but he hardened his heart against her, and thought of all his past sorrows, and his first words were bitter.

"I have not seen you since the discovery of the true heir. I have come here solely to contradict Mrs. Blight's report, that I fled the country on account of my debts. But this is positively my last appearance in evening dress, as a respectable member of society. To-morrow I don my smock-frock, and it will cut me off from my fellows as effectually as a nun's black veil cuts her off from the joys of a woman's life. Have you

no words of condolence ready for me?" He spoke in a strange, hard voice.

"Mine would be words of congratulation, Guy."

"Congratulation, Madge?"

"On all you have done, and are to do. You are a lucky man, I think, to have had the setting right of so much wrong. You know I always longed you should be a hero, that I might——"

Here the music ceased, and the silence disconcerted the trembling Madge so much that her voice ceased with it.

Guy waited a few seconds; but the end of the sentence did not come to him; he wondered what was Madge Burleigh's "might" to lead to; for a second a throb of wild hope almost dazed him; but she sat so still, looking away from him, that he thought himself a fool for such a hope, and he spoke again in his hard, strange voice:

"You have heard, of course, of my approaching marriage to Lady Vernon. Mrs. Blight has been telling my news loudly, everywhere it seems. *She* has by no means given me up!" And now Guy looked away, hoping that by such courageous, or rather outrageous acceptance of Mrs. Blight's falsehoods, he should show how little he cared for anything said of him.

There came no reply from Margaret Burleigh; only a falling rose-bud, that drew his attention to her in time to receive a fainting girl in his arms. His Madge! his darling! but so white and still he believed he had killed her.

And for the next few minutes Guy Vernon knew nothing of the world around him. It held for him but one form, in all the anxious crowd moving in terror to a side-room beyond the reach of the din of the dancing, the one form he still carried in his strong arms, and

so unwillingly yielded to Mrs. Burleigh and Sibyl Loraine's care when forced to do so. But even then he remained near enough to watch their vain efforts to restore Madge to life; near enough to share their joy when they could believe she really lived, and to hear her first feeble words :

"Mamma, what is it? Was Guy here?"

In an instant Guy was beside her, and her next words were addressed to him.

"What is the matter, Guy? Why am I here?"

"You have been ill, my own Madge. We were pretending to laugh at Mrs. Blight's lies about me, and you were ill."

As he spoke, the colour came back to Madge's white face, and she closed her eyes as if to rest, saying :

"I am better! I am well! Can we go home?"

The carriage was soon found, and, under

Guy's tender escort, Mrs. Burleigh and her daughter passed from the turmoil of the crowded ball to the silent staircase, and into their carriage.

He placed them in it, then sprang in himself, and gathering Madge's dress carefully into his strong hands, placed her feet upon the seat beside him, and covered them with a shawl.

"Do not let her speak, dearest Mrs. Burleigh; she has frightened us so that we all need time to recover ourselves."

And so, in perfect silence, they were swiftly carried home, and swept into the great solemn approach and ground up to the perron of Pendrills; and Madge was lifted from the carriage and borne into the morning room, and Pinner was sent for, and the pale girl was taken to her room before either Guy or Mrs. Burleigh had quite recovered themselves from the consternation Madge's illness had caused.

"I will not speak a word to night, dearest Mrs. Burleigh, but I shall be here to breakfast," Guy said, and hastily kissing her, he strode off to his mother's, where he was to pass the night.

There was something strange about Guy, Mrs. Burleigh thought, something different in the clasp of his hand, in his kiss, from any she had known before; but as she followed her darling upstairs, Guy's wildness was forgotten in the greater anxiety of that mysterious fainting-fit.

As soon as Miss Burleigh could dispense with Pinner's services she gently pleaded to be alone, and begged her mother to return to "kiss her good-night the last thing."

Clad all in white, with her little wax taper in her hand, the mother reappeared after a very short delay.

"Mamma," Madge said in a tender, low voice, drawing her mother down to rest close

to her on the sofa, "I am engaged to Guy."

"Engaged to Guy! I do not understand you, Madge! Since when are you engaged to Guy?"

"Since I fainted, mother."

"How can you joke on such a subject, Madge? You have not spoken to him."

"I did not speak to him, dear mother. When you were putting on your overshoes I —kissed him."

"For shame, Madge! But if you did, *that* does not engage you. It was silly, wrong, but it does not bind you."

"It may be silly, but it is true, mamma. I thought you would feel as I do about it, and knew all."

"I know nothing," the startled mother said.

"I mean why I fainted, and all that happened afterwards."

"I know of nothing that happened, either before or after you fainted. Say what you have to tell me plainly and intelligibly, Madge."

"Don't be angry, dear mamma; I do not want to hide anything from you. You know I have not seen Guy since that dreadful day before Lucy Vernon came to him. Then he said that, unless to engage ourselves for a solemn covenant, we would never take hands again. I wanted to tell him I repented of all my hardness and pride, and I was so glad to see him, and was beginning to tell him that I loved him, when Guy told me he was engaged to be married to Lady Vernon. My heart seemed to stop beating. The lights and the people all seemed to whirl round me in a great darkness, and I fell. You know, when I woke, Guy said he had been telling me 'of Mrs. Blight's lies about him,' so then I knew it was false, and he knew how dearly I

loved him, and I held out my hands to him, when you were putting on your wraps, and he bent down—and it was then, mamma. Say you are glad."

"It is very, very hard," Mrs. Burleigh said, more to herself than in answer to her daughter's simple story. "You have been very imprudent indeed, Madge."

"Oh, mother! Surely there was no harm when I meant such a solemn promise to be his wife. I am so weak to-night, mother." Here Madge covered her pale face with her trembling hands and cried. "I wish Guy was here now, to let me rest on his hands, and feel safe and happy, if you are angry with me."

Mrs. Burleigh's mind was in a tumult. It was hard to know how many emotions had crowded into it within the last half hour; and all came in strange disguises, so that she herself did not recognise her own feelings.

She sat down again beside her child, for she had left her side in haste as Madge made her unexpected confession.

And, after a few seconds' silence, Madge saw that her mother, too, was weeping; and she nestled up to her, and kissed her under her chin, as she had often done when naughty and pleading for reconciliation, and whispered:

"I feel so strange and nervous to-night, mamma, pray don't be angry!"

"I am not angry, darling."

"And you will be very good to Guy to-morrow, won't you?"

"It is very, *very* hard! But now you must try to sleep, darling! We are both of us unfit for any more confidences."

And so Mrs. Burleigh hoped she had gained time for thought, and she kissed Madge, and crept away with her heart still tormented by its crowd of contending feelings.

CHAPTER XX.

MR. BURLEIGH IS TELEGRAPHED FOR.

"One while they seem to touch the port,
Then straight into the main,
Some angry wind, in cruel sport,
The vessel drives again."

SIR CHAS. SEDLEY.

HAPPY the mortal, man or woman, who has not on one or more occasions felt that sudden sinking of the moral quicksilver which precedes a storm of conflicting interests: such a disturbance of the moral forces, that *wrong* takes the place of *right*, or looks so like it that we mistake one for the other.

In no other way can we account for sudden flashes of baseness in a magnanimous mind,

of meanness in a generous spirit, of falseness in an otherwise true heart.

The polarity of virtue is suddenly reversed. "Fair is foul, and foul is fair," and forthwith a good man or woman is no better, but much worse, than he or she should be.

Mrs. Burleigh awoke from short and troubled sleep in such a storm of moral confusion.

She was glad to watch the passing away of the masses of darkness floating like hobgoblins round her — those shadows of the night that seem to fly before the coming of the cheerful dawn.

But the dawn itself was not cheerful to Mrs. Burleigh. She had brooded over her sorrow in the night till there seemed to her but one course to take to cure it. And she hastened to take that course with a fear of not taking it quickly or quietly enough—a fear that ought to have proved to her that her conscience was not clear.

By the time Guy Vernon had fully awakened to the sense of his happiness, and left for the cold Ripple, all aglow with delight in himself and his fellow-creatures, the following letter was brought to him from Pendrills :—

"Dear Guy,

"Forgive me for asking you not to come to breakfast with us. Before you see Madge again, I must ask you to think seriously of what occurred last night. Madge owns to me, that a generous, but most imprudent impulse led her further than you were right in allowing her to go. In a matter of such vital importance to my child, I must not let my affection for you personally blind me to the hard facts of the case. Madge has now everything to lose—you, dear Guy, everything to gain, and a man should not depend on his wife. I shall not appeal to your honour in vain; nor will you think me worldly

or cruel to use my influence with you as I am using it. You know, when the case seemed to be reversed, how warmly I sought a portionless bride for Douglas. Our hearts have bled for you, Guy. We shall ever be among your tenderest friends; but do not ask us to be more, Guy, I do implore you. Save Madge all the pain you can in this break. If you can, pray go away for a time. Be generous as you have always been!

"Yours most affectionately,

"M. BURLEIGH."

Poor Guy! It was a terrible blow. Struck, too, by a hand he loved so well, that seemed still to linger in his clasp; the night had been so short; his happiness was so close to him, as he thought while swimming in the cold river.

To say he was stunned describes, perhaps, as nearly as words may, the utter numbness of his despair.

People don't think, and hardly feel at such moments ; their very trouble seems far off, and hardly to be theirs, until they awake, to the pain and distrust, the hatred, or the bitter scorn, that comes to different minds in that awakening.

Guy Vernon's first feeling was the one Mrs. Burleigh intended to suggest—an honest dread of having taken advantage of Madge's generous impulse. The justice of her mother's objection struck him most painfully. But there came a reaction.

Guy crushed the letter in his hand, saying to himself, "Do women creep into our hearts only to stab us? I could have sworn those lips *met* mine! They were not closed, nor turned from me. I could have sworn that as I lifted her in, her hand crept up towards my neck! There was no striving to avoid my arms. She may be capricious, but I am not the robber her mother insinuates." *There* was

the wrong! "They have had every proof a man could give of constancy and good faith, and *this* is the end! This jesuitical, blarneying appeal to me to go away, till they can face me once more without shame! I will *not* go. If my presence offends them, let them avoid it. My life must be what another's meanness has made it, but I will stand by my word to Lucy Vernon. Let these women play fast and loose if they will. I never will!"

Guy never thought of Madge as his property, but as Mrs. Burleigh's, through all his anguish. "Dear blundering old Guy!" His merry love had often called him. He did not know that there is a Rubicon which, at some time or other, every mother's daughter of us has to pass. Madge had passed out of her mother's dominion in his arms, as he lifted her indoors from the carriage.

Meanwhile, Madge, knowing nothing of that cruel letter, watched the little gate under the

silver birches, and listened anxiously too for footsteps through the hall, and all in vain.

The breakfast-hour drew near and struck; the great bell over the stables rang its summons to any far off loitering guests—as usual at Pendrills—in vain.

"He might have come early. He ought to have been here long before this," Madge said to herself, blushing as she thought of all the happiness ready for him in her welcome.

"We will not wait, I think, Madge," Mrs. Burleigh said at last, wishing with all her heart she knew how to break the disappointment gently to her child, as she saw Madge's eager glances across the lawn, and watched the expression of wistful tenderness that had come over the hitherto scornful little beauty. She almost wished she had not written now. It was marvellous what courage had come with the sunlight. Even a marriage between her Madge and the disinherited Guy lost half

its terrors by day. She thought she might even rejoice to have her only daughter living near her, under the most provoking circumstances and reverses, rather than married and carried off—goodness knew where—by a rich stranger.

"Do wait, mamma. If he has been detained, it will look so churlish to have begun; so unlike what you must be to Guy to-day, mamma. You promised to be very kind to him to-day. Do you know all that means?"

As she asked, she came and kissed her mother again under her chin.

"I promised nothing of the sort, Madge; and Guy may not be coming at all," Mrs. Burleigh said nervously, feeling that the cold plunge into the fact must be made.

Her butler saved her the trouble of the confession. He brought in a second supply of crisp toast, and announced, in a low voice to his mistress:

"Mr. Vernon said there was no answer, ma'am."

In an instant Madge knew by her mother's face something was wrong.

"You knew Guy would not be here, mother? Have you told him not to come?"

"I advised that he should not come, Madge, till I could talk over last night's folly calmly with you both apart."

"Will you tell me what you wrote to him, mother?"

"I cannot recall every word; nor do I think I should tell you if I could, Madge. You must trust to my love and my better experience in a matter of such vital importance."

"Still I think I have a right to know why Guy is not allowed to come and see me, after what I confessed to you last night, mamma."

"Do not allude to that again, Madge. It is a sad business altogether. Do not make it worse by dwelling on that impropriety."

"Have you told Guy you think it so?" Madge asked, almost fiercely, suppressing the word "mother" with which she had striven to keep her indignant distress within bounds. "Because if you have, you have done him a great injustice. It was *my* doing, not Guy's. It was *my* confession to him, not his to me. *I gave myself to Guy!* He is too proud to ask me to be his wife now."

"For shame, Madge! It must not be!"

"Have you told him so? Have you told Guy you have acted a part all these years, and loved Vernon's Chase and the title alone? Have you done this base thing, mother? Will you tell me the truth?"

"You forget yourself, Madge."

"I wish I could—I wish I could! And think only of dear, honest, generous, insulted Guy! Oh, Guy! will you ever forgive her!"

Madge turned and went to the window overlooking the little gate and Mrs. Vernon's

woods, and thought there awhile silently. With her heart so full of the great wrong done to Guy, there was no room for doubts of her own propriety—no time lost in debating what should or should not now be done. She came back to her mother's side, and spoke very gently indeed now.

"I must telegraph for Douglas, mamma." Douglas was her guardian. "When he thought I was cowardly and capricious in Guy's reverses, he offered to put all straight between us. He will help me to be faithful now."

"For more than two years, Madge, you have told me you did not love Guy, or, at any rate, you have rejected his love. I believe you are now carried away by the idea of doing a magnanimous act, and you are going into wild extremes. I do not believe that you love Guy, or that you could now be happy with him. Guy as a rich man would have been a

most generous one. Guy dependent on his wife——"

"Dependent on his wife Guy would never be," Madge broke in. "Guy's honest labour will support his wife. Guy's wife will work for him if he will. And love him—I will not tell you *how* I love him! It was fear of Mrs. Blight—fear of loving him as you did, for Vernon's Chase—that kept me from him. *Now* I am all his own!"

CHAPTER XXI.

QUITE OUT OF MRS. GRUNDY'S WAY.

"Thy love is better than high birth to me,
Richer than wealth, prouder than garment's cost,
Of more delight than hawks or horses be;
And having thee, of all men's pride I boast."

SHAKESPEARE (*Sonnet* xci.).

MR. BURLEIGH was telegraphed for, and came. He brought his wife with him, like a wise man, to set his confusions straight, to support him generally, and to pour oil upon the waters if there was to be, as he feared, a "glorious row."

"When these meek women take the bit between their teeth, they pull like the very

devil, Teresa. *Your* mother is the only one I ever knew who did not."

"Then I wonder how she did pull over to Spain?" asked the sprightly Teresa.

"Whew!" whistled Mr. Burleigh, and fell naturally into the old air of "Malbrook s'en va-t-en guerre," to turn the conversation.

Douglas Burleigh had his own very decided ideas on men, women, and matrimony. He had often rather rashly declared to his mother, that he would rather act as his sister's chief mourner than give her away to almost any man he knew. Yet when Guy Vernon was utterly rejected in his suit, and still more when marriage became the wildest scheme he could think of, unless a bride could be found to patch his tattered fortunes with cloth of gold, Douglas Burleigh had attacked both mother and sister on Guy's behalf, and had, we suspect, held out both his hands to that needy individual with Madge's fortune and

secret in them. The fact is, Guy's extremity had touched him so deeply that he felt more intense brotherhood for him than even for Madge.

We must let the visit of Douglas and Teresa Burleigh pass as nearly as possible unrecorded. The pains and perplexities of Mrs. Burleigh and her dearly-loved child were of short duration, and speedily buried beneath the loads of love and sympathy heaped over them in generous penitence.

Of the short, sad morning's work at Pendrills after the great ball at Lynn, no suspicion got abroad in Rippleford; and in a few days' time both Mrs. Burleigh and Madge might safely have declared they could never remember to have had an estrangement!

* * * * *

Mr. Vernon took his way at once to the Old Lodge the morning after the great ball; and it was therefore to the Old Lodge Mr.

Burleigh drove his anxious, pale-faced little Madge the morning after his arrival at Pendrills.

"Mr. Vernon is engaged, sir, and can see no visitors," Mr. Vernon's demure little maid told Mr. Burleigh, when he had made his way through the dust and *debris* strewing the old orchard, and stood with Madge at the open door, through which the workmen went in and out at their pleasure, apparently adding to the hopeless *confusion* that was to end in *improvement* there.

"Oh don't mind him, dear Douglas. Go in and speak to him," Madge urged piteously.

So Mr. Burleigh went in to the dusty den, in which the heartbroken Guy sat struggling with Nemesis in the form of piles of unsettled accounts and farming day-books.

Guy himself was in the garb proper for a despairing lover, and the master of a home given over to bricklayers and carpenters.

The oldest shooting-coat he possessed flapped across an ancient flannel-shirt, his trousers fringed by time, and his boots worthy of the fringes that rested on them.

The Rosetta stone was not harder of interpretation than the pages of numerals with which Guy had bewildered himself, in the vain effort to drive out the remembrance of the wrong Mrs. Burleigh and Madge had done him; and Guy's forehead bore upon it the marks of his clenched fists, upon which he had rested its unhappy weight of indignation and perplexity.

No wonder, then, that Mr. Vernon sprung upright, surprised and defiant, as Mr. Burleigh entered, and was followed by his sister. No wonder Mr. Burleigh's explanation of their coming was a feeble one, nipped so early in the bud by Guy's frozen reception.

"Madge wants to explain something to you, Guy, my dear fellow. She fancies you

have been deceived by some note or other. What is it, Madge?"

From an ex-member of Parliament perhaps this was as clear an introduction to the subject matter in dispute as could be expected. Madge's own few words were quite to the point:

"I want to speak to Guy alone, brother; will you wait for me outside?"

Mr. Burleigh went.

"No explanation is necessary, Miss Burleigh," Guy assured her, in a voice as utterly unlike his own, as his appearance was unlike that of the Mr. Vernon who had towered, pre-eminently handsome, above the military dandies at Lynn. "Any excuses, any words of comfort even from you *now* would be a cruel mockery."

"Nevertheless you will hear me, Guy," Madge said in her sweet low voice; and she went round the littered table and stood close

to him, with her hands pressed one upon the other on it, to hide their trembling.

"I feel as if we had been *betrayed*, Guy; and I have a right to make all clear between us. When"—here the eloquent blood tingled into Madge's oval cheeks for a second, and then chased back to the speaking heart, and left her as pale as when she came—"when I kissed you the other night, Guy, you knew that I hoped then I might be your wife. Something terrible must have been written to keep you from coming next morning as you promised. I knew nothing of that letter Guy, and—mamma repents. I know this is the crisis of my fate, Guy, for good or evil, trust or doubt of all; but you alone shall decide what it is to be. If *you* love me still, and wish me for your wife, take me. If *you* doubt my love, as my mother does, I will leave you. Do not fear to tell me the truth." The young voice sank to a whisper almost ere

it ended this simple appeal, yet the trembling words fell like the strokes of a sledge-hammer on Guy's over-strained senses. He positively throbbed under them, and fell — yes, Guy, the giant, fell, with his arms round the brave-hearted girl, on his knees before her; and his breath came so hard and fast, that if Guy had been a woman one would have said he sobbed his answer. But we may leave them; there are joys too full for words, and we will leave them to their own sacred silence.

* * * * *

It was Guy, after all, who joined Mr. Burleigh out in the orchard, and forthwith nearly dislocated his arm with his violent brotherly gratitude as he uttered his fervent "God bless you, dear old fellow, for all you have done for me!"

And then he begged Mr. Burleigh not to let Madge be "*bullied* for any more explanations to-day," but to entreat Mrs. Burleigh

to let her spend a day or two at Mrs. Vernon's to meet her shabby giant. "I can be there on Saturday night," Guy explained, "till early on Monday, and till then it will all seem like a dream. Be sure you persuade Mrs. Burleigh to spare Madge to my mother. I know she must go now."

CHAPTER XXII.

"OH, MARGERY MINE!"

"Oh, how this spring of love resembleth
The uncertain glory of an April day,
Which now shows all the beauty of the sun,
And by-and-by a cloud takes all away!"
SHAKESPEARE (*Two Gentlemen of Verona*, i. 3).

As soon as Madge's trouble was over, all her vagaries came back to her. In fact she and Guy seemed to vie with each other which could most worry or disconcert their parents and neighbours.

Ordering the trousseau would naturally have been one of Mrs. Burleigh's greatest consolations; but Madge would not even allow that to be ordered as the trousseau of

Miss Burleigh of Pendrills should have been. She had whims and fancies without end regarding that trousseau. *This* was not fit for Guy's circumstances; *that* was what she knew he disliked; *this* not the colour to rest his eyes; *that* not fitting her position. As if any bride since the days of Adam had ever consulted her husband's taste or circumstances as to her first dresses!

Then Madge would have a walking wedding, through the Pendrill woods, and would walk to church with Guy!

"Why not?" she asked captiously.

"Oh, Margery mine!" answered Mrs. Burleigh, hoping, by gentle words, to turn her thoughts from a whim so contrary to all Mrs. Grundy's precedents. "Think how you would be stared at, and talked of, my darling."

"Not more than if all the Blights and MacBeggah Tweedys and Vansittarts and Chetwynds and Briggs and all the 'carriage

company,' as the poor people call them, came. I should feel happier passing along with my poor friends than with all our rich neighbours, who would like to run pins into wicked Madge Burleigh, and see if she could be made to wince, or to burn me as a witch, because Guy has loved me so long."

"But we must ask the neighbours, child. How can you dream of leaving Mrs. Loraine and Sibyl uninvited?"

"Oh, they will come and walk with me, of course," the wayward girl answered. "Just a few who love us will invite themselves, mother."

"But, my dear, Lady Vansittart has made out a list for Gunter, and quite expects——"

"We won't have one of them, mother!" Madge said with such determination that Mrs. Burleigh was astonished. "We won't have one of them!" she repeated, laughing at the effect her decision caused; and she doubled

her little fist, and shook it in fun at the invisible Lady Vansittart, and the conventional wedding-cakes and breakfast. "But I will beg my mother to have a party and a day's rejoicing to gladden every cottager friend we have for miles round."

Then Mrs. Burleigh determined not to fight her pet single-handed any longer. She would get Guy's approval of her plans. Guy was full of loving kindness again for her.

But, just as if there was some invisible spirit flying between the betrothed, she found Guy just as determined as Madge. He would rather, far rather, walk to church with Madge. He liked his poor friends, shook his fist at rich gossiping neighbours, and he ended the appeal about Lady Vansittart and Gunter by exclaiming:

"Hang Lady Vansittart and Gunter! She has been trying to inveigle my Madge for that high-shouldered fellow her son. If either

of them come, Madge shall not appear at breakfast."

Mrs. Burleigh only said what she believed when Pinner "hoped she was not ill with all the trouble she had," when she made up her mistress's fire the last thing, and wished to extinguish the little wax taper by Mrs. Burleigh's bedside.

"My heart is broken, Pinner. Miss Madge cares only for Mr. Vernon, and Mr. Vernon almost swore at me."

"Oh dear, oh dear, milady!" Pinner had once lived with a titled lady, and it came so naturally to her tongue at moments of emotion, she said, to call her present lady by the endearing address. "Not at you, milady. Mr. Vernon swore at Lady Vansittart. So many gentlemen do. At his age no gentleman has any feeling for a lady so entirely made up, and rouged so high. But how lovely Miss Madge will look passing through the flickers of sun-

shine, all along the brook-side to church," continued the really good-hearted but affected elderly maiden Pinner, whose soul was stirred to almost poetic depths by the approaching event. "I never heard of any lady who kept carriages choosing a walking *nupshalls.* But it's beautiful in Miss Madge — every one says so."

"Who can have heard it, Pinner?"

"Everybody, milady! Butcher told cook, and gardener says the sweep heard it up at The Beeches when he *swep* the Loraine chimneys. Canter says, but quite in confidence, 'Thousands 'll come to see her!' Yes, he says, 'thousands is the figure!'" Mrs. Burleigh groaned gently as the appalling crowd seemed to be closing round her snow-white darling. "But how it first came out was this. Mrs. Kidd was grieving that the men might keep the little school-children from seeing; the path from the carriages to the church is so

short. 'There shall be room for everybody,' Miss Madge answered in her hearty way, 'I will walk to church all the way, but the children shall see me if they like!' Mrs. Kidd thinks saying the words put it into her heart. It so often does when there isn't a bit of a thought to begin with. But everybody is real wild now to see the *walking nupshalls.* All among the spring flowers, and all across the lawns, and past the silver birches, and under the great gloomy trees at Mrs. Vernon's that master thought so much of. Gardener says, 'Won't she come out like a white dove neither from under those blasted cedars? I has my doubts whether or no Mr. Guy will ever cage her. But if he do, she shall walk from church on every flower I calls my own.' You know gardener's amusing manner of speech; but he says all his 'feelings is roused. Miss Madge knows the right road to a poor man's heart,' he says. 'A lady must go afoot if she wants

to find that; that's why so many misses it.'"

There was no sympathy to be had for Mrs. Burleigh's grievance, that was clear. And life for the next six weeks was very hard indeed to her.

She did not like to complain to Mrs. Vernon, for Mrs. Vernon had openly declared, if any one was in fault it was Madge. As if a man should not guide his wife. She is not yet his wife. She is your own wayward Madge Burleigh still.

After such a speech as this, implying that Madge was so full of faults, Mrs. Burleigh felt there was nothing for it but to leave Mrs. Vernon to come round of her own accord.

As for consulting her, or kissing her more than just when they met every few days, it was impossible. There was no quarrel. Nonsense! They were both too busy to be

for ever trotting to and fro between Pendrills and the great scathed cedars. That was all.

But little breezes, here, there, and everywhere, like cat's-paws at sea, ruffled the course of this true love to the last.

Mr. Vernon declared, in a rash moment, that, sooner than be accompanied by the confidential Abigail Pinner, he would give up any honeymoon trip! He believed such a trip to be a snare and a delusion, and he could ill spare the time for one.

And Miss Burleigh of Pendrills declared she would go on her wedding journey alone with Mr. Vernon.

And Pinner had hysterics, and screamed at the thoughts of the ill-folded dresses, and ivory brushes wrong side up, and the limp collars and sleeves, and all the neglect of the wedding paraphernalia she saw with a prophetic eye during her attack.

"Don't make yourself ridiculous, Pinner," the fearless Miss Burleigh said when the screams had penetrated to her favourite room, the old nursery, now changed to the very brightest of maiden bowers, with tokens of all the sunny memories the maiden treasured so richly in her heart, clinging to every inch of it, like those in a votive chapel to Notre Dame de Bon Secours. "Take a glass of wine, and then a good long walk, and then set to work and make yourself the brightest, prettiest Japanese silk in grey you can find in Lynn, for you must follow us close into church, remember."

"Ridiculous! I'll never forgive her—never!"

Nor did she, that cantankerous, ridiculous old maid, until she married gardener, and found how natural it was to do all her hushand wished.

"I even helped him," she confessed later,

"to empty his earwig traps, and never so much as screamed once; and the slugs I have seen destroyed, Mrs. Guy Vernon, would turn *you* against a floricultural companion for life—they would indeed."

Then Mr. Vernon had a horror of displaying his treasure to the world in general on the wedding-trip as bran-new, and he begged Madge would "save some old clothes, and borrow something solid to wear as a bonnet, to come *on* your head and under your chin."

"Something like the enchanted helmet in the 'Castle of Otranto,' I suppose? It would kill me, Guy. It would crush my vanity, and then I should die. My idea of a bonnet is of something as fresh and as fairy-like and incomprehensible as frost upon the window-panes! But come now, dear Guy, I will be serious. I have saved my old grey felt hat with your heron's plume upon it—the one I

wore that day to Vernon's Chase, when you put your brand upon me, Guy—will that please you ?"

Guy bent down, and that was settled.

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